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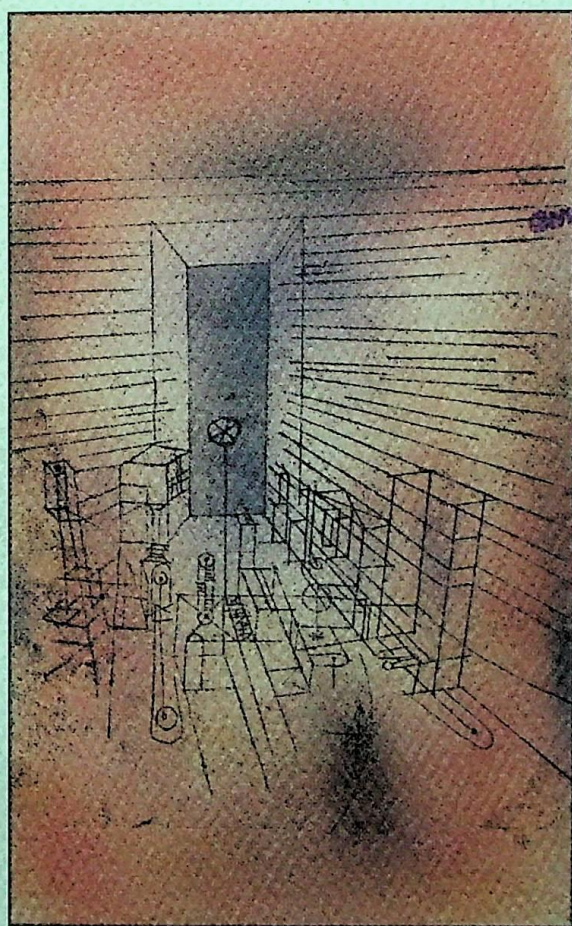
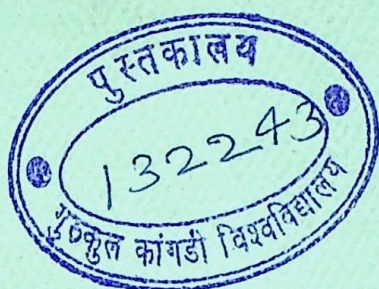
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# Twentieth-Century Literature

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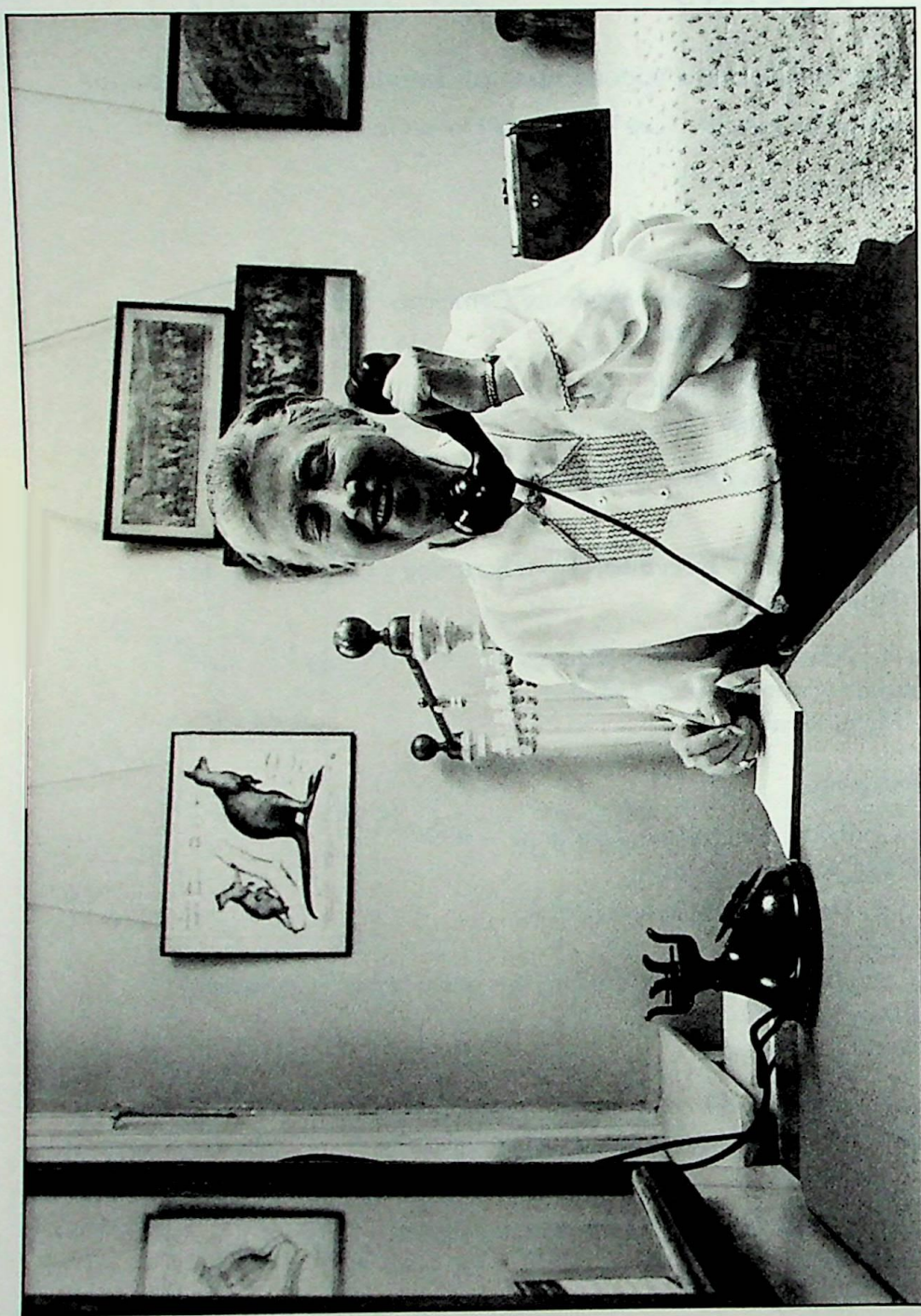
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Marianne Moore at home, during a photo shoot for a feature in *Life*, 1953. Copyright Jean Buble and Estate of Esther Buble



# Secrecy, Sacrifice, and God on the Island: Christianity and Colonialism in Coetzee's *Foe* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

Jay Rajiva

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* begins with a shipwreck and ends with a confrontation underwater, as an unnamed, previously unvoiced narrator encounters Friday in a place "where bodies are their own signs" and each spoken word "is caught and filled with water and diffused" (Coetzee 1986, 157).<sup>1</sup> In this confrontation, Coetzee also withholds Friday from the reader's understanding, securing his body, as Gayatri Spivak notes, in "the real margin that has been haunting the text since its first page" (1999, 186). Thus Friday gestures only as that which will always keep its silence within the dominant colonial and historical register: we never receive any specific indication of what Friday might be, except a symbol of the breakdown of meaning. Friday is mute, intractable, mysterious, yet linked to the inexpressible "sounds of the island" (*F* 154). I argue that the tension in Coetzee's repetition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* springs from the exposure of the Christian secret in both the colonial enterprises of the characters and the authorial presences of Defoe and Coetzee. My argument draws on Jacques Derrida's characterization of Christianity in *The Gift of Death*, which outlines how Christianity incorporates (but does not destroy) older, non-Christian elements into its own epistemic framework without acknowledging this act of incorporation. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe, the white colonial explorer, explicitly sets out to convert Friday to Christianity and succeeds in that goal through the triumph of Christian tenets: devotion to God requires the keeping of an absolute secret, a willingness to sacrifice, and prostration before the gaze of God, at whom, because God is always what exceeds one's understanding, one can never gaze back. Friday and Crusoe's discussion about the worship



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of God offers a startling if inadvertent subversion of the Christian subject position in Defoe's novel. And the nonpresence of Friday in *Foe* widens this subversion, revealing the work of colonial Christianity as still in transition, convulsed by the repetition of what it is attempting to subordinate in secret: the non-Christian other whose sacrifice cannot be openly acknowledged. I suggest that what *Foe* accomplishes, as a literary response to *Robinson Crusoe*, is to expose this secret *as secret*, to lay bare the religious economy of sacrifice on which the colonial enterprise has historically rested.

The vexed relationship of *Foe* to the ethics of representation has been well-documented. For Michael Marais, "Cruso's authorial imperialism . . . is informed by the hermeneutic urge to domesticate both Friday and the alien landscape of the island by integrating both into a European system of recognition" (1996, 69), while Teresa Dovey observes that in *Foe* "the colonised subject has no discursive authority within the field of western discourses" (1998, 26). Derek Attridge (2004) writes of the relationship between Derridean ethics and Coetzee's fiction in terms of his commitment to the radical alterity of the other's voice, both as a textual impossibility and as the precondition for any kind of ethical exchange. Spivak, in her turn, focuses on the implication of Western feminism in the capitalist-driven colonial framework within which Friday is "the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text" (1999, 190). Valuable as these readings are, they tend to treat Christianity as the historical accompaniment to the novel's representation of colonialism, rather than as a vital part of how the process of colonial incorporation is staged. What this essay will demonstrate is the way *Foe* uses the mechanics of stalled repetition and secrecy to characterize colonialism as a hegemonic framework both constituted by and constitutive of *Christian* ethics. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee is clearly uncomfortable with David Attwell's suggestion that his writing has moved closer to an implicitly Christian notion of grace: "As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet" (Coetzee 1992a, 250). Even so, as Patrick Hayes has noted, Coetzee does seem concerned with "a debate of fundamental importance between 'cynicism' and 'grace,'" where cynicism is "the denial of any ultimate base for values" and grace is "a condition in which truth can be told clearly, without blindness" (2006, 275). Indeed, Hayes locates the turn from cynicism to grace as a watershed moment for Coetzee, whose later work (notably *Age of Iron* [1990], *The Master of Petersburg* [1994], and *Disgrace* [1999]) pits the endlessly self-serving individuality of cynicism against the struggle, however blind or obdurate, for some notion of earthly



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salvation.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, Friday's body, like the "earlier" version of Defoe's Friday, becomes visible as the implicit target of conversion; as it becomes visible, it allows the novel to expose exploitation as the heart of a specifically Christian colonial project.

Linda Hutcheon (1988) has characterized *Foe* as an example of historiographic metafiction: postmodern writing that interfaces with and contests specific historical moments within an intensely self-reflexive formal framework, calling attention to the fissures and instabilities of history as a branch of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon argues, "rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts, in strong terms, the specificity and particularity of the individual past event," acknowledging "that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know the past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process" (1988, 122). Historical details are thus frequently "falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history," thereby dramatizing the "process of attempting to assimilate" (114) rather than focusing on the end result. Drawing on Hutcheon, I extend the critical discussion of Coetzee's oeuvre by locating in *Foe* a structural relation to Derrida, one that attends to the relationship between the assimilative process of Christian conversion and the ethics of narrative. In recasting Defoe's story of the colonial explorer as anticolonial metafiction, I argue that *Foe* creates a tacit but insistent *Christian* subtext of failed repetition that binds the two stories together. Within a Derridean framework, imaginative repetition in the novel discloses itself as a task beset by failures it can never acknowledge in a Christian context. In enacting these failures of repetition, *Foe* dramatizes the epistemic limit of the colonist as a specifically Christian limit, illustrating the extent to which each framework subtends and informs the other.

## Repetition and incorporation

My readings of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe* depend upon Derrida's exegesis of the development of Christianity in *The Gift of Death*. There Derrida consolidates this development into three sequential phases: demonic (orgiastic) irresponsibility, Platonic (ethical) responsibility, and, finally, Christian conscience or the *mysterium tremendum* (trembling mystery). The origin of the demonic lies precisely in the absence of responsibility: one has no obligation to respond to the other, to seek recognition in the face of the other, or to justify oneself before another, free to satisfy an internal drive that envelops one in interiority. The demonic thus involves



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secrecy, disdaining to elaborate or disclose itself. Identifying the demonic as that which “crosses the boundaries separating the human, the animal, and the divine” (1995, 3), Derrida discusses the attempt to historicize this question of secrecy in relation to the birth of “modern” Europe. We can thus make the tacit link from the demonic to paganism, mysticism, totemism, and cannibalism: to everything beyond the pale of Christianity at its formation.

Plato attempts to break with demonic secrecy by turning the self away from irresponsibility toward “the Good and the intelligible sun, out of the cavern” (7), forsaking the dark secrecy of the cavern for the sunlight of full disclosure. However, in rendering this turn as progress toward a “new mystery of the soul,” and in ignoring its specific historical (European) context, Platonic responsibility never truly breaks with demonic mystery; rather, it holds it in hiding, asking us to keep two secrets, two mysteries of erasure (8). Though Derrida does not stress the point, to my mind this passage from demonic to Platonic is a re-creation: the demonic is not destroyed but instead persists in the form of a repetition whose disembodied possibility sets the ethical limit for the Platonic subject.

In the final phase, Platonic responsibility gives way to a Christianity that supplants the light of the Good with that of God, binding one to a relation with a wholly other whose gaze penetrates to one’s very soul. God demands that one give everything to him without knowing in advance what the result may be; one’s sense of responsibility is now permanently lodged in a devotion to God. But in order to elevate “the natural foundation” (Derrida 1995, 24) of Christian theology, this passage into Christianity surreptitiously relies on Platonic rationalism, thereby de-prioritizing responsibility in and of itself. Furthermore, while responsibility of necessity must entail a recognition of what it means to be responsible, this responsibility is, according to Derrida, never sufficiently theorized in Christian theology. We are left, that is, with an irresponsible (because incomplete) definition of responsibility, which remains opaque and thus maintains a tacit connection to the irresponsibility of demonic mystery: another repetition and another secret.

Just as this tacit connection inhabits Christian theology, it has ramifications for attempts to work through Christian origins in the ethical register. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud characterizes the association of the demonic with the pagan (non-Christian) as a teleology: totemism, the mystical worship of and identification with a strong animal, gives way to cannibalism, as the strong sons kill and devour the father, in turn



acceding to the worship of human gods, as polytheism, and finally to monotheism in the forms of Judaism and, subsequently, Christianity.<sup>4</sup> That Freud acknowledges he has little or no historical basis for this formulation dovetails with Derrida's positing of this tradition as specifically European: the non-European other becomes the locus of that which exceeds the parameters of Western psychoanalytic discourse. Freud's dismissal of the need for evidence, or for logic, demonstrates the construction of the European Christian self as a process whose urgency overrides the historical specificity of what it is attempting to contain and sublate. Talal Asad sees the development of modern Christian doctrine, for example, as tacitly relying on Enlightenment reason, which creates issues of "translation" when Western anthropologists attempt to study non-Christian religions such as Islam (1993, 2). Such quandaries call attention to the forms that disavowed repetition (incorporation) can take even within disciplines such as psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy that seek to account for the givenness of origins.

For Derrida, Christianity is driven to incorporate the demonic and the Platonic into itself and then to erase all traces of that process. In this, he himself partly repeats Asad's interrogation of Christianity's turn toward secrecy and interiority, which, for Asad, is the Kantian "construction of [Christianity] as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time" (1993, 207). However, the incorporated trace is, for Derrida, always visible by virtue of the contradictions and slippages by which the older systems of knowledge are subsumed. Literature, in its turn, dramatizes the difficulty by which branches of knowledge negotiate the givenness of their own founding principles. To the extent that *Foe* is an intertextual repetition of *Robinson Crusoe*, both works represent a silence: requiring nonreciprocal sacrifice to God, faith is irreducibly secret and never open to repetition, but the hidden incorporation of older demonic and Platonic elements becomes a stalled repetition that haunts the problem of conceiving ethical responsibility to the human. *Foe*, I argue, exposes the incorporative process by linking the colonial project to a historically contingent Christianity. I will stage this argument by examining the conversion of Friday in both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe*, characterizing him as the element that resists "proper" integration into the European ethico-religious system of both novels. Friday's refusal to be legibly coded is not merely a refusal of colonial hegemony but a challenge to the Christian ethic of asymmetrical and secret sacrifice.



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## Crusoe and Friday

In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the connection between intratextual repetition and the disavowed repetition within Christianity emerges in Crusoe's failure to acknowledge the symbolic and moral significance of the events leading up to his shipwreck on the island. Twice over or more, Crusoe is shipwrecked, repents, ignores the signs of fate, suffers a setback due to a violent and unexpected storm, debates over whether to kill a cannibal (or cannibals), and quells all doubt with the pleasures of the flesh. He rejects his father's warning that he will suffer the same fate as his older brother<sup>5</sup> if he ventures into "miseries which Nature and the station of life [he] was born in seemed to have provided against" (RC 3).<sup>6</sup> He boards the ship that eventually shipwrecks on the island on the same day he first sets out from his parents' home, finds the same barley growing on the island as in England, and even re-narrates the events of his shipwreck in his journal. At first, as in the instances above, Crusoe spurns any inclination toward the Christian devotion that eludes mortal understanding, in favor of either rationalism (the barley had been accidentally cast ashore from the shipwreck) or irresponsibility (banishing his hesitation through drink). At this point, he is "thoughtless of a God or a Providence," acting "like a brute from the principles of Nature" (68). It is only with the onset of illness, imposing on him solitary reflection, that he is prompted to recognize that Providence "knows that I am here, and am in this dreadful condition" (70). Through this recognition, Crusoe gradually becomes secure in his faith, not merely resigning himself to God's will in his continued isolation on the island but "even to a sincere thankfulness" (101) for that isolation.

However, Crusoe's discovery of Friday on the island opens up a space of tension through a remarkable exchange between them about religion, God, and the devil, in the context of Crusoe's attempt to convert Friday to Christianity. I am not particularly concerned with treating Crusoe as an exemplar of formal realism's encapsulation of the individual,<sup>7</sup> nor do I wish to discuss the impact of "colonial setting" on "Crusoe's individualism . . . in a world in which he is surrounded by religious and cultural Others" (McInelly 2003, 2). I want to read this attempt in order to illustrate how Defoe's text creates the discursive possibility of resistance within Christianity's very terms, setting the stage for Coetzee's *Foe* to critique the incorporative, interpenetrating processes of both colonialism and Christianity. Initially, Crusoe strives to distinguish God from Benamuckee, but he is forced into a tautology: worship God because he is superior, but he is superior only because Crusoe compels Friday to worship him. Musing that "the policy of making a secret religion in



Christianity and Colonialism in Coetzee's *Foe* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

order to preserve the veneration of the people" can perhaps be found in "all religions in the world" (RC 166), Crusoe, despite his intentions, exposes the constructedness of Christianity's claim to colonial authority: the secrecy of one's connection to God is by definition unverifiable and is the basis for *any* religion, not merely for Christianity. As quickly as he introduces this possibility, however, Crusoe drops it, insisting on a spatio-ethical contrast between Benamuckee, who can only be worshipped on mountaintops, and God, who is able to receive prayers from anywhere, in secret, in one's own heart (evidenced by Crusoe's many private "conversations" with God before he encounters Friday). While the pagan god is spatially bound, the Christian God is unseen but omnipresent, and when Friday reveals that Benamuckee's priests communicate his word to the people, Crusoe denounces their behavior as a "fraud" and a "cheat" (167). God becomes the foundation of natural law, a rational *a priori* demanding responsibility even as it obscures the origins of such a demand.

The arbitrariness of such origins nonetheless emerges, however, in Crusoe's discussion of the devil: "I entered into a long discourse with him about the devil . . . his setting himself up in the dark parts of the world to be worshipped instead of God, and as God, and the many stratagems he made use of to delude mankind to their ruin; how he had a secret access to our passions and to our affections; to adapt his snares so to our temptations." Now it is the devil who works in "secret." If the devil has "secret access" to innermost souls, however, what prevents him from being God in another guise? What distinguishes God from the devil? Against his aims, Crusoe has thus positioned the devil as an imaginative repetition of God, and himself (the voice of another) as the messenger of a God who may be the devil. Arguing that Defoe stages these conversion scenes to demonstrate "the need for evangelism of a fairly sophisticated kind" in order to recruit converts to Christianity, Timothy Blackburn illustrates the tendency in Defoe scholarship to instrumentalize Friday's conversion, showing how the uncertainty of the Christian ethic is quickly subsumed to the exigencies of colonialism (1985, 373).<sup>8</sup> In other words, while Crusoe may well need a more "sophisticated" theoretical framework in order to be more convincing as a missionary, his failure here also opens up a space of anticolonial resistance for Friday that the novel cannot resolve except by ad hoc closure.

Faced with a colonial subject who will not readily keep the secret by accepting God as the foundation of natural law, Crusoe speaks an original repetition by which he is the messenger of God but also, like Benamuckee's priests as he understands them, the emissary of the devil.



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Such unstable speech, born of the other's refusal to accept the givenness of Christianity, evokes Derrida's critique of Austinian speech act theory: "Does the quality of risk," he asks, "surround language like a kind of ditch or external place of perdition which speech could never hope to leave, but which it can escape by remaining 'at home,' by and in itself, in the shelter of its essence or telos?" (1988, 17). For Derrida, there is no staying "at home" for language, because establishing that prior place of safety is itself of necessity a linguistic process. The condition of undecidability, once acknowledged, is not easily dispensed with, as Friday, when told that God is undoubtedly stronger than the devil, wonders why God does not simply kill the devil and be done with the matter. To this Crusoe has no response except the hasty temporization that God will eventually punish the devil, which rather than settling the question simply prompts Friday to renew it, as he reasonably then wonders why God does not strike the devil down right now, before he can do any more harm. Crusoe finally asserts that God gives all beings, even the devil, time in which to repent and be forgiven, to which Friday, in a masterful counterstroke, replies: "That well; so you, I, devil, all wicked, all preserve, repent, God pardon all" (RC 168). Friday has thus exposed the contradiction in Christian moral law, that God and the devil, ostensibly opposed beings, are revealed as fundamentally similar, both seeing the subject in secret without themselves being seen, and Crusoe is confronted with that contradiction, the secret of his Christian premises now laid bare.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, God cannot tolerate repetition—any exposure of the historical continuity with the figuration of the devil (demonic mystery) or of the tautology of natural law, positing a thing that we can know in the first instance, objectively, before anything else is given (Platonic responsibility). Moreover, any symmetrical "form of reciprocity" between the Christian subject and God must give way to asymmetrical devotion (Derrida 1995, 101), which then secretly effaces the moment of its own inception. God is all-seeing and immortal, yet I am not; he sees me but I cannot see him; the devil, who is not God, can see me in secret like God but can repent just as I can; all-powerful God cannot slay the devil. God must dissolve reciprocity in secret, and Friday's crime is speaking the secret aloud, and thus Defoe's literary mobilization of Christian doctrine is fatal to the integrity of that doctrine. To repair the situation, Crusoe sends Friday away while he prays to God for a means of convincing Friday to worship Christ, but, strangely, Defoe never represents Friday's passage from nonbelief to belief "on-stage," nor does Friday provide much input during his conversion. Presumably, Friday has



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been left to discover his own trembling secret, to develop his soul in an encounter with God, who sees without being seen, in secret from Crusoe. But just as the novel fails to represent the moment of conversion itself, it also fails to consolidate Crusoe's authority as both narrator and Christian colonizer.<sup>9</sup> This lacuna is partly attributable to the epistolary format in which Crusoe's thoughts are rendered after the shipwreck. However, the fact that Crusoe's own moral and religious doubts find concrete expression in his diary itself draws attention to Friday's absence: without the explicit benefit of intellectual struggle, Friday has arguably become a "better" Christian than Crusoe himself. On first glance, this absence of interiority is perfectly consonant with the colonial project, readable as a Deleuzian "mechanical" repetition of the original white, Christian explorer, absent any sustained intellectual inquiry. However, the net result of this absence is to leave the reader with a far more vivid impression of the astonishing *challenge* that Defoe has permitted Friday to mount against the moral and natural legitimacy of Christianity, a challenge that puts Christianity into interpenetrative dialogue with colonialism as an economic framework driven by self-interested necessity. The narrative is unable to accommodate the plenitude of Friday's religious conversion, dramatizing the gap between his intellectual rigor, prior to his conversion, and the "reformed" subject whose ability to engage the topic of religious faith has vanished as the direct result of narrative and, thus, colonial necessity. In other words, the text is obliged to make Friday's religious conversion a narrative *fait accompli* to serve the needs of colonialism.

## The secret of sacrifice

Taking Defoe's novel on its own, one might be forgiven for reducing Friday's queries to nothing but the detritus of a prelapsarian ontology whose naïveté is happily and organically consumed by Christian theology. Considering the novel together with Coetzee's *Foe*, however, complicates our understanding of these queries. Where Defoe's Crusoe uses a journal to narrate his stay on the island in exhaustive detail, Coetzee's Cruso scorns the written word in favor of his own memory, displaying almost nothing of the explicitly Christian devotion that saturates Robinson Crusoe's account of his life and times on and off the island:

"If Providence were to watch over us," said Cruso, "who would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar-cane? For the business of the world to prosper, Providence must sometimes wake and sometimes sleep, as lower creatures do." He saw that I



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shook my head, so went on. "You think I mock Providence. But perhaps it is the doing of Providence that Friday finds himself on an island under a lenient master, rather than in Brazil, under the planter's lash, or in Africa, where the forests teem with cannibals. Perhaps it is for the best, though we do not see it so, that he should be here." (F 23-24)

This critique of Christian divinity is a far cry from Defoe's *Crusoe*, who insistently places Providence as not only beyond human understanding but also as ceaselessly and actively concerned with human affairs.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Coetzee's *Cruso* willingly compares God to lower creatures, creating an insupportable repetition in Christian thought, which amounts to a heresy. Christianity is deeply implicated in the system of production whereby Friday, "a slave and then a castaway," has, in Susan Barton's words, been stripped "of his childhood and consigned to silence" (F 23). If *Cruso* believes that Providence must slumber in order for the "business of the world to prosper," such a disavowal registers the hypocrisy of religious conversion, since it is precisely Robinson *Crusoe*'s missionary zeal that converts Friday into a docile body within a capitalist framework; the image evokes the eighteenth-century plantation economies of the Caribbean, largely driven by the production of sugar and cotton. Coetzee's *Cruso* frames Providence as necessarily favoring some people over others, casually noting that Friday's subordinate status on the island is preferable to "the planter's lash" in Brazil or the supposed "cannibals" of an undifferentiated Africa. The latter image, of course, anticipates the Friday of *Robinson Crusoe*, who openly participates in a culture of cannibalism; to *Crusoe*'s queries he responds: "Yes, my nation eat mans too; eats all up" (RC 164). Coetzee tethers the investigation into Friday's silence specifically to a moment when the extent of divine (Christian) influence is under intense scrutiny; having previously considered Friday "in all matters a dull fellow," giving him "little more attention than [she] would have given any house-slave in Brazil," Barton's response to Friday evolves into "the horror we reserve for the mutilated" (F 24). Yet this evocation of an untold story is itself the product of a story that *Robinson Crusoe* must also, in its turn, leave untold: the mutual constitutive relationship of Christianity and colonial hegemony.

In this passage on Providence, we can perceive a *Crusoe* "in waiting," the colonial explorer of Defoe's novel who will eventually subdue and convert Friday to Christianity. However, Coetzee's novel suspends the advent of this figure by keeping two issues at the forefront of the narrative:



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the duty toward individuals such as Friday, and the mystery of his missing tongue. The question of duty gestures to ethical responsibility in the Platonic, rational sense, while the missing tongue testifies to demonic irresponsibility, without endings or beginnings. Only by incorporating (in the Derridean sense elaborated above) these issues into a Christian notion of ethics can Defoe's *Crusoe* come into being as a legitimate representative of colonial authority. Rather than a disinterested, inconstant presence who "must sometimes wake and sometimes sleep," Providence in *Robinson Crusoe* is a God who watches everything in secret, holding the subject in the trembling terror of the gaze that the subject can never confront eye to eye. In *Foe*, by contrast, the circuit of incorporation is revealed and, by that revelation, disrupted.

If God cannot tolerate repetition of himself, how does sacrifice replace that repetition with ontological certainty? Through the abjection of accepting sacrifice's necessity. Derrida takes up the biblical problem of God's demanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, without God's providing any justification for the demand. At the scene of what he thinks will be an animal sacrifice, Isaac wonders where they will find a sacrificial lamb, and Abraham replies, "God will provide a lamb" (Derrida 1995, 59). Though he does not lie, as Derrida notes, he keeps a secret by saying nothing in his response about God's demand, and thus "transgresses the ethical order." Isaac's deliverance comes precisely when Abraham has mentally given over his son to sacrifice: in the moment when he acquiesces in thought to killing the son he loves, forsaking the ethical relation to his family for the absolute interiority of the secret fulfillment of God's wish, God relents and spares Isaac's life. Abraham's sacrifice of his son in thought is the repetition that both anticipates and negates its material enactment. In accepting the thought of killing his son, Abraham anticipates the actual moment when it will happen, but this willingness to commit mental filicide is exactly what prompts God to spare Isaac's life. To be ethical, to refuse to kill his son even in thought, would render the Christian subject irresponsible to God.

It is not accidental that in instructing Friday on the teachings of Christianity, Defoe's *Crusoe* mentions that "our blessed Redeemer took not on Him the nature of angels, but the seed of Abraham" (RC 168), prefiguring a later scene in which Friday, thinking that *Crusoe* means to send him back to his own people, asks *Crusoe* to kill him instead, speaking with such tearful conviction that *Crusoe* decides not to send him away. Defoe's Friday thus replays the dilemma of Abraham, offering himself up as absolute sacrifice to an inscrutable superior (*Crusoe*) who



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withdraws his command only at the moment when Friday has sacrificed by acquiescing of his own accord, without rancor, expecting nothing in return. In *Foe*, this withdrawal cannot occur, as Friday remains unloved and therefore—if, as Derrida maintains, one can only sacrifice what one loves, or what one truly values—remains unavailable for sacrifice within the symbolic order of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The narrative consistently precludes sympathy for Friday, rigidly adhering to Barton's focalization, the colonial slant of which renders it epistemically impossible for her to understand Friday. We get no sustained intersubjective engagement between Friday and Barton, and each attempt to locate meaning in Friday's actions and gestures ends in failure. When Barton provides two sketches of how Friday might have lost his tongue, for instance, and asks Friday to indicate which of them is true, he merely offers a "vacant" (*F* 69) stare, forcing her to give up the endeavor. When Barton accompanies his flute-playing and dance with music, Friday persists in the same tune that constitutes "no pleasing counterpoint" (97), leaving her to wonder, in the end, whether Friday can even hear her. The slate that Barton and *Foe* use to teach Friday to read proves useless, as Friday returns the slate to them marked with nothing but rows of unblinking eyes, the naked attempt to impose their will on the colonized other staring back at them, but without a human frame of reference. Friday never speaks, declares his humanity, or enacts a human relation to which Barton can ascribe any positive meaning. Friday's body is impenetrable to understanding and, again, to sacrifice, its status as persistent non-response a constant source of frustration to Susan Barton: "Oh, Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered!" (79). In Barton's many attempts to imagine and recreate Friday's life, his interiority, and his desires, repetition becomes an aporia; stripped of structure and reiteration, each repetition founders and degenerates into "mere congeries of fragmented forms" (Casey 1975, 255). Never answering Barton's questions, Friday remains a being whose negation of the sacrificial secret of Christianity means that his death will only ever be a murder, not a sacrifice.

## Foe of the Christian heart

That Coetzee's *Crusoe* narrative appeared at the height of apartheid oppression has informed much of its reception. Understanding *Foe* as deeply engaged with "the powerful silence which is the price of our cultural achievements" (2004, 67), Derek Attridge also sees Coetzee as having, to some degree, "abused his privileges as a member of the white



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elite in addressing not the immediate needs of his time but a mystified human totality" (71). In sum, Attridge argues that the novel investigates its (and Coetzee's) relation to the literary canon in an attempt to participate "in the struggles of those who have been silenced" (72) along lines of race, class, and gender. Correspondingly, Kwaku Larbi Korang rejects what he perceives as the "romance of an abstract and universal textuality" (1998, 183) in the figure of Friday. Most polemically, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) has charged Coetzee with retreating from the brutal political realities of an apartheid system that had already triggered the declaration of the State of Emergency. Coetzee's Friday, Ngugi avers, "has no tongue, no voice, no language, and hardly any energy" (1993, 53). By contrast, Jarad Zimble (2004) has emphasized the importance of reading Coetzee in the context of the specific publishing history of *Foe*. As Zimble notes, the Ravan Press edition of *Foe*, part of a book series funded by the same Staffrider magazine whose urban Marxist outlook provided a powerful forum for young black writers to chronicle the daily experience of apartheid, placed the book squarely alongside explicitly political black South African output. In the Ravan Press book blurb, Friday is a "mute negro," the prisoner of an island society of "stone terraces above bleak and empty beaches" whose "rules are strict and simple: survival, industry, order. Cruso is master and Friday is slave"; the blurb ominously hints of "battle lines" being drawn between Cruso and Barton, to which the "silent Friday" is the only witness (Zimble 2004, 51).<sup>12</sup>

Shifting somewhat from the body of criticism that approaches *Foe* along the axis of direct political engagement, I read the novel as the product of an author for whom it was impossible, during the apartheid era, "to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body" (Coetzee 1992a, 248). If we read Coetzee's novel against Defoe's, this bodily suffering consistently takes place both within a tacitly Christian framework and in the context of a disavowed notion of grace that dramatizes the author's own ambivalent relationship to Christian discourse (discussed above). Particularly telling is Coetzee's equivocating remark that he is "not a Christian," or "not yet" (250). The ambivalence of Coetzee's "not yet" is entirely apposite in a discussion of Friday's place within and between projects of Christian conversion: *Foe*, in this sense, is the metafictional "not yet," the moment before Christianity becomes the disavowed heart of the colonial enterprise.

For Derrida, the heart is the dwelling-place of secrecy in the Christian self. Removed from all exteriority, the secret must be learned "by heart" without any "semantic comprehension" (1995, 97): this is the



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very essence of devotion to God. Thus, Abraham's willingness to kill his son is not a lesson, nor can we incorporate it into a calculus of ethics without violating the excess of what that willingness must mean before only God, and no other authority. Ethics, expressed as public discourse, murders devotion to God, which is before and above all other duties; we might even say that by speaking his secret aloud, Abraham would murder God. Properly formulated, one's devotion to God tenders the secret of God only to the heart:

The heart will thus be, in the future, wherever you save real treasure, that which is not visible on earth, that whose capital accumulates beyond the economy of the terrestrial visible or sensible, that is, the corrupted or corruptible economy that is vulnerable to moth, rust, and thieves. That does more than imply the pricelessness of celestial capital. It is invisible. It doesn't devalue, it can never be stolen from you. (98)

What the heart contains, then, is invisible, incorporeal, immutable; it defies quantification or exchange; it remains impregnable to theft or loss of value; it cannot be debased or cheapened by any means because it is never intelligible as an exteriority. The heart thus inaugurates the secret as paradox: if spirituality is now in-dwelling, secrecy becomes meaningless as a signifier, because God, the arbiter of the secret, sees everything, even that which one wants to keep secret. The locus of the secret is divinity within me, something that is irreducibly secret and unavailable to others, yet in order to keep this secret in my heart, I must trace a limit between exteriority and God, who by definition can never be reducible to limits. But God's secret resides in me, with my consciousness of him as both proof and precondition of the material exterior.

Tellingly, Derrida's consideration of the heart turns on a question in the form of a repetition: "Where is the heart? What is the heart?" The heart is the organ that circulates blood through my body, without which I cannot live. Therefore, to speak of displacing my heart is to speak of my death in ordinary terms. Yet according to Derrida, the secret heart is "subtracted from space" (101): that is, elided from temporality through displacement. By transforming into the receptacle of a secret, the heart vacates the body. If, however, we were to refuse the transformation of the heart into the atemporal keeper of the Christian secret, or defer this transplant-as-transformation, we would reveal the presence of the operating table, the presence of the surgical scene itself. Such a scene finds its literary expression, I argue, in *Foe*. Despairing of ever teaching Friday



to write, Barton wonders how Friday can “be taught to write if there are no words within him, in his heart, for writing to reflect, but on the contrary only a turmoil of feelings and urges” (*F* 143). In Friday's own not-yet-Christian heart, she imagines, lies the demon that Christianity must incorporate but then disavow. The terror, however, is that Friday's heart refuses such a surreptitious incorporation. While *Robinson Crusoe* presents the Christian subject fully at home with God as “the secret hand of Providence” that can “search into the remotest corner of the world, and send help to the miserable whenever He [desires]” (*RC* 210), *Foe* refuses the transplant of the heart, returning us to a textual and historical moment prior to the figuration of the heart as the keeper of the Christian mystery. We are thrown back into an ethico-spatial instant between worlds that exposes the formulation of Western, imperialist, and Christian ideology. This exposure necessarily works through the novels *in tandem*: *Foe* can stage a critique of Christianity as an ethical framework only through the intertextual conversation it invites with the explicit conversion narrative of *Robinson Crusoe*. At the center of that conversation, and of the ethical hollowness thus represented in *Foe*, lies Coetzee's refusal to accept the Christian heart of Defoe's novel.

It is true that, though Coetzee's Friday remains unincorporated into the Christian circuit, he cannot retain autonomy within the narrative's framework of social relations. He cannot protect his own body from the colonial exercise of power, nor can he achieve any state of being in which his subjectivity could find direct expression. Furthermore, making the possibility of an epistemic break from colonial logic impossible, and perhaps even unethical, risks glorifying the insularity and ethical paralysis of the white South African writer. Certainly, such observations are important in precluding any valorization of stalled meaning for its own sake, a type of post-structuralist euphoria in aporia that conveniently effaces real inequalities in representation.<sup>13</sup> However, I would argue that while Susan Barton may be paralyzed, the novel is not, and this distinction is part of what gives *Foe* its ethical meaning. In reimagining *Robinson Crusoe*—what Attridge refers to as “probably Western culture's most potent crystallization of its concern with the survival of the individual, the fundamentals of civilized life, and the dialectic of master and servant” (2004, 70)—Coetzee casts the reality of apartheid against that which would rather remain secret: the exploitative origins of the imperial project, and the relationship between that exploitation and Christianity as a discursive and ethical framework. Metafictionally, Coetzee thus addresses how Defoe's *Crusoe* comes into being in “the time of conversion” (*RC* 10), exhuming the



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unacknowledged ethico-spatial moment before Christianity has subsumed Platonic responsibility and demonic mystery to itself.

As metafiction, *Foe* continuously performs its concern for the validity of narrative within a broader context, offering narrative as rehearsal, revision, counterfactual, unthought, possibility, and impossibility. It consummates its own destruction on every page, anxiously confesses its sins to other readers and writers, and destabilizes its own narrative memory, even supplanting its narrator with another at the climactic encounter with Friday in his own "space." Finally, it shows author, narrative, and characters in a state of becoming, a state anterior to *Robinson Crusoe* the published novel. It does this not merely to take us "behind the scenes," so to speak, in a gesture that would risk reinscribing the hegemony of the author but rather to halt us perforce at a historical moment of conversion and contestation. If *Robinson Crusoe* puts repetition to work to clear the path for what cannot bear repetition (God), *Foe* destabilizes the negotiation of this work through exposure of Christianity as a clandestine process of incorporation. Susan Barton tells us that she has "a desire to be saved which [she] must call immoderate" (F 36), and, later, faced with a godlike Foe who haunts her with a woman claiming to be her daughter, Barton sardonically remarks that, "in Mr. Foe's house there are many mansions" (77). As Barton draws the comparison between the author and God, Coetzee gestures to the unspeakable in Christianity, which Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* will soon replace by the *a priori* "significatory matrix of the imperium" (Marais 1996, 68), within which the givenness of Christianity will no longer be available to critique. The trembling mystery is emerging, being "fathered" within the fabric of Coetzee's novel—an emergence represented in relation to an absence, Friday's missing tongue. When Susan Barton hesitantly inquires how Friday lost his tongue, half suspecting Cruso of having cut it out, Cruso replies that "Friday lost his tongue before he became mine" (F 37). Coming on the heels of Barton's confession that she has a desire to be saved, Cruso's reply is fraught with religious significance. Is it Cruso speaking here, or is it the soon-to-be Robinson Crusoe of Defoe's novel? Following this trail, Friday could only ever have become Cruso's by losing his tongue, rendering him the demonic mystery silently constituting the spectral limit of the Christian self, a repetition of the demon. Yet this discussion between Barton and Cruso is possible only in a discursive register that allows its speakers to question God without foreclosure. *Robinson Crusoe* sublates this questioning to an offstage conversion; *Foe* leaves it suspended, without resolution.



The Christian heart is a secret, as Derrida has it, and also the *secrecy* of a secret: the silence that stretches over the demonic and the Platonic, the unacknowledged components of Christianity's trembling mystery. We spy the rough draft of Daniel Foe's work; we peruse the iterations of what will become *Robinson Crusoe*; we witness Friday treated as a beast of burden by Cruso and then Barton, whose professed desire "to educate him out of darkness and silence" poorly masks her willingness to "use words as the shortest way to subject him to [her] will" (F 60); and we never hear Friday speak, except at the end of the story, when what we hear, "the sounds of the island" (154), overwhelms the parameters of the novel's narrative. In these acts of readership we stumble into a hitherto sanctified space, disturbing a secret and thereby exposing the economy of sacrifice within which the white colonizer strips the colonized other of agency. As I have argued, this exposure is the meta-work that *Foe* steadfastly refuses to abandon, the persistent return to the surgical scene, where the newly transplanted heart must now make its primary essence the keeping of the originary secret of incorporation, the *a priori* that casts out ethical responsibility to the other. I earlier touched upon Derrida's formulation of the dissymmetry, the rupture in reciprocity that enables the Christian subject's relationship to God. Is it not, therefore, characteristic of Coetzee to perform such dissymmetry in the very acts of writing and publishing *Foe* as a white South African during apartheid? What critics ask of Coetzee is not what he delivers; and Friday's story is not what Daniel Foe will publish. In both cases, reciprocity is denied. To the extent that *Foe* is a revision of *Robinson Crusoe*, it is also an acknowledgment of Coetzee's own authorial impotence: in destabilizing Defoe's textual authority, that is, Coetzee cannot help but undermine his own, and the literary act of repetition becomes the means of gesturing toward what these repetitions conceal. Gilles Deleuze has noted that "if exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition" (1994, 1). *Foe*, then, is the heart just prior to its reception of the secret of Christianity as incorporative process: illuminating an anterior erasure, Coetzee's theft (the Christian colonizer's theft no longer secret) becomes a gift to the reader.

## §

Jay Rajiva is assistant professor of global anglophone literature at Georgia State University. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and *Research in African Literatures*. His forthcoming book, *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature, Tactility, and the Ethics of Representing Trauma* (Bloomsbury 2017), interrogates the representation of trauma in literature of the late apartheid in South Africa and the partition in South Asia.



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## Notes

1. *Foe* will be cited as *F*.
2. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* attempts to find redemption for a life of privilege in an apartheid system as she dies of cancer; in *The Master of Petersburg* the fictional Dostoevsky, grieving over the death of his stepson, struggles with an ethical obligation to "answer to what he does not expect" (Coetzee 1994, 80); in *Disgrace* David Lurie seeks forgiveness from the father of Melanie Isaacs, the girl he has raped.
3. Coetzee understands his writing on Tolstoy in these terms, noting that since "the basic movement of self-reflexiveness is a doubting and questioning movement, it is in the nature of the truth told to itself by the reflecting self not to be final" (1992b, 263).
4. See Freud 1939, 102–7. Freud is, however, also focused on how Christian doctrine incorporates its excessive other into a religious tradition that must deny all traces of such incorporation. As an example, he discusses the ritual of communion, which, in its call to Christians to consume and thus incorporate the body of Christ, secretly gestures to older rituals of incorporation through cannibalization. Freud notes that insofar as Christianity "took over from the surrounding peoples numerous symbolic rites, reestablished the great mother goddess, and found room for many deities of polytheism in an easily recognizable guise" (112), it did not maintain the monotheistic rigor of Judaism.
5. Crusoe is the younger brother who eventually acquires wealth and fortune in place of his older brother, who is lost (dead). In this, he represents what Freud sees as the fate of the younger brother in pre-Christian myths, "who, protected by his mother's love, could profit by his father's advancing years and replace him after his death" (1939, 103). For Freud, the father is of course God, with the older brother paralleling the Satanic figure in relation to the younger brother as the Christ figure.
6. *Robinson Crusoe* will be cited as *RC*.
7. See Watt 1957.
8. Another tendency is to fixate almost exclusively on the trajectory of Crusoe's spiritual journey. Focusing on the parallels between *Robinson Crusoe* and Augustine's *Confessions*, Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, for example, confines her analysis to Crusoe's own revelations. Arguing that "the troubled relation of Crusoe's Puritan religion and his secular worldly enterprises has been and remains the central quandary of the text" (2012, 644), she declines to extend her argument productively to account for Friday's challenge to what she sees as Crusoe's "flawed theology."



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9. In this sense, my argument dovetails with Hinojosa's reading of Crusoe's faulty theology. However, I am less interested in performing an exegetical critique of Crusoe's religious belief than in isolating how this belief dramatizes the incorporative process of Christian colonization. In other words, resistant elements such as Friday must be sublated, after which the process itself is erased, leaving only disavowed traces.

10. Timothy Blackburn links the "simultaneous occurrence of Friday's birth and Crusoe's arrival on the island" to Defoe's insistence on "God's constant role in human life" (1985, 368).

11. Similarly, Giorgio Agamben defines homo sacer as one whose "entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (1998, 183).

12. Zimbler (2004) draws a contrast between the Ravan Press blurb, with its Secker and Warburg British analog that made a point of comparing Coetzee to European authors such as George Orwell and Umberto Eco, and the later Penguin edition of *Foe*, which focused on Susan Barton's "missing" narrative as a feminist project of reclamation.

13. Benita Parry offers an eloquent critique of what she perceives as Coetzee's fascination "with the euphoria of desire unmediated by words," which discursively eliminates any inquiry into "how deprivation inflicts silence on those who are homeless in a hierarchical social world" (1996, 48, 46).

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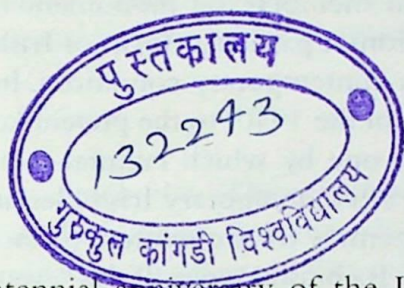
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# Famine Memory and Contemporary Irish Poetry

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To mark the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Irish Famine,<sup>1</sup> entrepreneur Norma Smurfit donated the work of sculptor Rowan Gillespie to the Irish state; it is now installed on the Custom House Quay along the northern bank of the river Liffey, which runs through Dublin city. The sculpture consists of a group of figures in bronze. Their bodies are elongated and emaciated, their clothes roughened and tattered, their belongings carried in small bundles under stooped shoulders and tired arms; they straggle along the quay as if intending to embark on one of the infamous coffin ships that crossed the Atlantic in the 1840s.<sup>2</sup> Nearly a year after the figures were installed, Smurfit proposed to add a “sea of names” (Kelleher 2002, 262) to be cast on bronze plaques set in the cobbles surrounding the figures; she offered individuals and corporations the opportunity to purchase plaques and add their inscriptions to the memorial. The gesture was controversial, interpreted by some as an attempt to link surviving generations with the legacy of the Famine, while others saw the plaques as a callous commercialization of history. The monument embodies a shift observed by Jeffrey K. Olick, “from a culture of monuments to one of memorials; in place of the celebration of heroes . . . mourning victims” (2010, 212). Today, visitors to Dublin can be seen on bright days posed next to the statues, their bodies seeming fat and well-fed next to these figures that recall anonymous ancestors and forge a connection between diaspora and Irish homeland. These tourist photographs dedicated to personal genealogy and ancestral remembrance reverse a history of shame attached to the Famine and its refugees; at the same time the practice of posing beside these statues indicates a prevalent contemporary participation in the production of cultural memory.<sup>3</sup>

While the installation works effectively to connect contemporary identity with past loss, it is itself oddly abstracted from any explanatory history<sup>4</sup>: the causes of the Famine are not voiced, the politics of hunger



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are unexplored, the connection between colonial occupation and indigenous starvation—a connection much debated in Famine historiography—is never made.<sup>5</sup> Emptied of political history while gesturing toward cultural memory, the monument represents heritage nostalgia and a retreat from a particular form of Irish politics that calls upon the past to explain contemporary conditions. In contrast, a strong thread in Irish poetry from the 1940s to the present keeps alive a counter-narrative of the Famine, one by which cultural memory serves to help expand understanding of contemporary Irish identity.<sup>6</sup>

At the opening of a conference on the Famine in 1995, Irish president Mary Robinson spoke of this “event which more than any other shaped us as a people. It defined our will to survive. It defined our sense of human vulnerability. It remains one of the strongest, most poignant links of memory and feeling that connects us to our Diaspora. It involves us still in an act of remembrance which, increasingly, is neither tribal nor narrow” (quoted in Whelan 2004, 203). Robinson’s claim is that centering cultural memory on the Famine opens a narrowly national version of Ireland to the diasporic, promising by this inclusion, anticipated in the poetic tradition, to invigorate the uses to which Famine history is put. While Lorraine Ryan sees Famine memory as a “monolithic entity” that is “centered on white Catholics” (2011, 207), I will argue that in contemporary Irish poetry’s Famine memory, with its emphasis on diaspora, purist versions of Irish identity as Catholic, indigenous, rural, and situated are replaced with inclusive and hybrid connections to Irishness as widely transnational. The “tribe,” emphasizing the native, the endogamous, and the monocultural, is challenged by the cultural complexities of diaspora. Contemporary poetry, that is, preserves the transnational investments of Irishness in Robinson’s version of Famine memory while troubling the heritage nostalgia that has dominated discussions of diasporic connections.<sup>7</sup>

The Gillespie monument materializes many of the issues that vex Irish Famine memory. As a highly diffuse series of events, the Famine left no singular place of remembrance, but, rather, that “great hunger” left its material traces only in unmarked graves and Famine roads across Ireland, and left more ephemeral reminders in a legacy of mass migration of the Irish people across the globe. As poet Derek Mahon writes, “From famine, pestilence and persecution / Those gaunt forefathers shipped abroad” (1979, 25). Echoed in a struggle with poverty stretching well into the twentieth century, the Famine has been treated both as a shameful blight and as proof of national courage and valor. Contemporary Irish poetry



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works to establish new connections to that historic catastrophe, enlivening connections that help forge a diasporic, transnational Irish cultural consciousness in the present. And in some cases such poetry brings that catastrophic past to bear on present efforts toward politically responsive global food policy and international environmental stewardship.<sup>8</sup>

## Famine history

The Irish Famine refers to the period in the 1840s and most particularly between 1845 and 1847 when the Irish potato crops, on which the largely agricultural population depended for sustenance, were wiped out for several seasons by an airborne fungus. During that period the population succumbed to horrifying conditions of poverty and starvation, many died of malnutrition and its related diseases, and many more were forced to leave Ireland in the massive emigrations that continued for nearly fifty years.<sup>9</sup>

Why did one crop's failure devastate an entire country? By the mid-nineteenth century two-thirds of native Irish people were tenant agricultural workers. This status commonly meant that landlords would produce grain as a cash crop on large estates where tenants provided labor in return for the right to occupy small landholdings on which to grow crops sufficient for their own sustenance.<sup>10</sup> Potatoes were uniquely suited to these demands on impoverished lands, providing high nutritional value and thriving in poor soil.

In 1845, an airborne fungus—*phytophthora infestans*, which grew on and rotted the potato underground—overtook Ireland's crops. Farmers who consequently could not contribute to plantation labor or pay rents were evicted by landlords, some of whom struggled to meet tax burdens. Recognizing the widespread hunger that threatened a population dependent on the potato, United Kingdom prime minister Robert Peel (of all names) was quick to enact relief measures; however, he notoriously did not prohibit the export of food from Ireland.<sup>11</sup> The following year, crop failures had increasingly dire repercussions, but the newly elected (John) Russell government avoided direct relief, intervening instead with public works projects funded by local tax money. An unusually harsh winter worsened conditions before direct relief was finally administered, and that transition to direct aid was itself fraught: disease spread quickly through soup kitchens, which were not opened until three months after public works employment was terminated.<sup>12</sup> Based on detailed economic analysis that reverses some of the conclusions drawn from previous



historiography, Joel Mokyr asserts that in the worst year (the infamous Black '47), the "British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish. There is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland" (1983, 291).<sup>13</sup> "It is not unreasonable to surmise that had anything like the famine occurred in England or Wales," Mokyr concludes, "the British government would have overcome its theoretical scruples and would have come to the rescue of the starving at a much larger scale." A colony from which the empire extracted taxation as it quelled movement toward independence, Ireland was still "not considered part of the British community." Half the sums later spent on the Crimean adventure, Mokyr contends, could have saved "hundreds of thousands of lives" (292).<sup>14</sup>

Cormac Ó Gráda argues that "Irish famine relief effort was constrained less by poverty than by ideology and public opinion" (1999, 82), and Famine roads are perhaps the most infamous of the resultant failed colonial relief policies administered during the catastrophe.<sup>15</sup> Male heads of households were paid for manual labor creating transportation infrastructure throughout the largely rural island. But this relief work did not support families when these men succumbed to disease or starvation. Other men had to travel to the relief work, making it difficult to transmit needed funds or food to their families. Finally, under the crisis conditions of famine, planning for these works was poor. In his contemporary letters from Ireland, Alexander Somerville noted: "Leaving Kilkenny, and taking the route to Tipperary, I found many people working on the roads for the public pay of tenpence per day. The roads are sadly cut up and disordered by the expenditure of that public money" (1994, 48). By 1847, direct relief could not reverse the worsening conditions; that winter brought epidemics of starvation, scurvy, typhus, and dysentery.<sup>16</sup>

Fleeing from starvation and disease, over one million people emigrated. The immense increase in travel from Ireland to Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia (among other locations), and the extreme poverty of the travelers, produced a situation ripe for exploitation. Responding to the demand for passage, profiteers nominally reconfigured the holds of cargo ships to accommodate passengers, so that Ireland's poorest emigrants, those who had already suffered from starvation and associated, highly contagious diseases,<sup>17</sup> were crowded together in poor conditions with inadequate provisions and insufficient sanitation.

Though the catastrophe was set in motion by the fungal infestation of potato crops, it is now widely understood as having been socially constructed by the imposition of monoculture and the failure to



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adequately respond to the disastrous consequences of the infestation. One extreme version of this history labels the Famine as genocide. At the other extreme, local populations were blamed for their failure to overcome the challenges of blight. Reflecting on this vexed history, contemporary poetry testifies to historic loss while indicating the subtleties of collective identity as it rests on cultural memory. In its metatextual reflections on its own making, the labor and artifice of writing, it draws attention also to the constructedness of history, to the artifice of historical writing. In its self-conscious recognition of its own formal and technical means it also opens our awareness to historiography as craft and the multiple uses to which history can be put.

## Cultural memory

Cultural memory is the process through which a community puts history to present use. More specifically, here I define it as a contemporary response to history, compelling vibrant collective engagement with the past but also patterning personal reflections through which readers might imagine themselves into another historical context and reflect on its challenges. As Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn note, if it is “narratives that construct (and deconstruct) identities by comparing ‘once upon a time’ and ‘here and now,’” then “identity depends on memory” (1989, 4). Sara Berkeley’s poem “Famine” illustrates this process, suspending Famine history in a persistent, eternal, and personal present in which, she writes, “infinite hunger / yearns at the rim of the world, / famine gnaws my bones” (1994, 67).

Pierre Nora observes that cultural memory relies “on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (1989, 13), on archive and monument, but much of the material evidence of the Famine was erased, and its archive was neglected for over one hundred years. Countering that erasure and neglect, Irish poetry began to provide a different kind of record, and it continues to enliven the recent and rapidly expanding Famine memorial culture. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues it is precisely through the screen of cultural memory that, guided by its own concerns, the present sees the past, just as, as Dominick LaCapra elaborates, it is cultural memory that determines “what aspects of the past justifiably merit being passed on as living heritage” (1998, 64).<sup>18</sup> In the Irish context, Oona Frawley proposes, such memory helps construct the “cultural imperative” to achieve the “imaginative



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reclamation" (2011b, 28) necessary to decolonizing, a process entailing "recovery of cultural memory occluded during the colonial period" (3) when migration disrupted the maintenance of shared tradition. If such decolonizing efforts to "remember" involve idealizing a precolonial past, Famine poetry instead works toward recovering contested histories and understanding them as being informed by concerns of the present.

Irish Famine poetry thus enacts what Tzvetan Todorov describes as "exemplary memory" (1996, 14)—a process extrapolating an event's parallels to contemporary circumstances that demand present mitigation, as a kind of ethical payment for the failings of the past. As Steven Knapp suggests, "narratives preserved by collective memory" can thus support a normative morality, and can "provide criteria, implicit or explicit, by which contemporary models of action can be shaped or corrected, or even by which particular ethical or political proposals can be authorized or criticized" (1989, 123). Knapp's concern is with how cultural memory produces particular norms. We could think, for example, of how Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger," discussed below, delineates the cramped moral norms attendant on Famine memory in the early decades of the independent Irish republic, while more recent poetry unsettles such constrictive norms, pointing to new moral standards, to norms entailing transnational allegiances, environmental stewardship, and global hunger relief obligations. If collective memory thus produces "collective authority" (Knapp 1989, 123), Famine memory, in particular, authorizes moral duty to (an expansive understanding of) the Irish collective and its connection to other peoples who suffer hunger and displacement.

Although Famine memorials participate in "the re-creation of 'Ireland,'" R. F. Foster notes, "by communal acts of remembering and celebration," he occasionally finds "it is hard to avoid the feeling that the new, modernized, liberated Irish consciousness feels a sneaking nostalgia for the verities of the old victim-culture: which was also, in its way, a culture of superiority" (2002, 23, xv–xvi). In the service of contemporary "Irish self-validation," that is, the richness of historical fact can be corrupted. As Charles Maier argues, this can produce "inevitable and continual conflict," on the one hand, or "complacency and collective self-indulgence," on the other (1993, 137). Paul Muldoon evoked such potential corruptions in relation to Famine memory, seeing in the failed peace talks in Northern Ireland imagined sectarian antagonists who "ate the flesh of each other / Like people in famine" (2002, 11). Here, the conflicts between landholding settlers and indigenous tenants extend from



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the nineteenth century into twentieth-century peace negotiations, and they justify continued factional divides.

While the certainties of cultural memory may rely on the “dubious historicity of the collective memories of peoples and nations” and can become the rationales for often violent political interventions, David Rieff notes that in partial contrast to Foster’s scorn for the adaptation of “recovered memory” to historical contexts “the best psychological evidence suggests strongly that what trauma survivors suffer from is passed along for two if not three subsequent generations” (2011, 62). In light of this evidence, Marianne Hirsch (2001) attends to what she calls the practice of “postmemory,” as the response of later generations to traumatic history understood primarily through narrative and aesthetic presentation. Hirsch notes: “Postmemory is . . . mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation—often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible” (2001, 9). Catastrophe, she argues, survives in succeeding generations as a series of canonized, heavily coded icons: resistant to the demands of historical accuracy, it enters text as emblem or anecdote. Offering a similar account in relation to the Famine in particular, Christopher Morash argues that, “like all past events the Famine is primarily a retrospective textual creation. The starvation, the emigration, and the disease epidemics of the late 1840s have become ‘the Famine’ because it was possible to inscribe those disparate, but interrelated events in a relatively cohesive narrative. For those of us born after the event, the representation has become the reality” (1995, 3). The particular textures of this retrospective creation are inscribed iconographically in contemporary poetry’s contributions to Famine memory debates.

In Famine poetry the impossibility of accurately presenting catastrophic loss functions as an index for the extremity of experience that both calls for and defeats mimetic repetition. Catherine Phil MacCarthy’s “Hunger,” for example, draws on familiar Famine iconography (“digging / a few stalk of potatoes,” “hungering for oblivion” [1994, 22]) without delineating the poem’s time frame, the Famine conflating with present experience through a sense of perpetual recurrence in suspended, non-mimetic time.

As Famine poetry marks the impossibility of mimesis, of containing the cataclysmic in representation, this very failure of mimesis troubles the certainties of cultural memory: if the Famine cannot be represented, how can it be remembered? How does it inform a present national identity?



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Deliberately interrupting a continuous narrative of calamity, then, contemporary poetry preserves the Famine as fragmentary, relying on a rich seam of iconic images for deprivation, depredation, and starvation. Associated in modern consciousness with the sacred status of trauma and loss, such images express the position of the writers in postmemory, their belatedness producing a species of survival guilt that rehearses present responsibility as if in mitigation both for past losses and for the loss of the past. In its repetition of Famine iconography—blighted fields, work-relief roads, unburied corpses, coffin ships, and hunger—such writing serves not to enforce memorial clichés but, rather, through its connection to the past to suggest how cultural memory might be made exemplary in Todorov's sense. Particularly, such iconography works to expand cultural memory from the island's boundaries to its transnational diaspora, from a rehearsal of historical grievance (such as Muldoon questions) to an exploration of contemporary responsibility.

## Blight

In Kavanagh's groundbreaking poem, "The Great Hunger," set approximately one century after the blight, Famine still dictates the ordinary practices and attitudes among a largely agricultural Irish community.<sup>19</sup> It is in emotional poverty, however, that the deprivations of the 1840s are repeated in twentieth-century Ireland. Hunger replicates itself in another register, that is, when the whole social order is organized to guard against the possibility of material deprivation, and the result is an emotional hunger wrought by excessive emphasis on work, on physical sustenance, and on fearful conformity to community norms.

In "The Great Hunger," cultural memory serves a regulatory function. Reflecting the constrictive morality of the early independence period, years associated with Eamon DeValera's administration, with its emphasis on the "tribal" and "narrow"—on rural values, manual labor, Roman Catholic orthodoxy, and moral purity—Kavanagh's poem describes a family that may benefit from the fertility of their fields but experiences starvation in the sterility of imagination. Through his transformation of georgic conventions, he illustrates how Famine memory performs a normative function.<sup>20</sup> Georgic verse based on Virgil's model tends to idealize farm life as the proper political and moral standard for the republic as a whole. In Kavanagh's poem, though, the demands and hardships of agricultural work produce disappointment and compromise more



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than moral rectitude and political progress in this new Irish republic. The fertility of the land, in a georgic poem cause for community optimism, here is calculated merely as a financial asset or risk, and a national vision dependent on such thinking about agriculture must be similarly narrow and constrained.

The central figure of Kavanagh's poem, Patrick Maguire, faces his fertile fields and wonders "if his mother was right / When she praised the man who made a field his bride" (1964, 28). The infertile crops of the nineteenth century become the desexualized bodies of the twentieth:

Maguire spreads his legs over the impotent cinders that wake no  
manhood now

...

His sister tightens her legs and her lips and frizzles up  
Like the wick of an oil-less lamp. (53)

In Kavanagh's poem the deprivations of Famine authorize conservative cultural norms restraining sexuality, regulating the imagination, enforcing relentless physical labor, and leaving inebriation as the only authorized outlet. Arguably the hardest hit by these norms, women are enlisted as agents of enforcement.<sup>21</sup> Imagination, in other contexts subverting moral constraints, is constrained in the service of repetitious, banal, and lonely masturbatory ritual, betraying the fear of the body's fertility when it is associated with cultural memories of agricultural infertility. In these ways, Kavanagh's prevailing influence on recent poetry inscribes in it the Famine's effect on the daily lives, practices, and perceptions of the Irish population.

In recent years, poets have been writing in the shadow of "The Great Hunger" expanding from the hardship and deprivation Kavanagh emphasizes as a particular problem of the native, rural Irish. Seamus Heaney's early poem "At a Potato Digging," for example, describes crowds of laborers following a "mechanical digger," their bodies bowed in "fear and homage to the famine god," the fruit of their labor "piled in pits" like history's mass graves where potatoes look like "live skulls, blind-eyed" (1966, 33). The land that once betrayed human hunger still festers like a "running sore" and demands human obeisance. To Kavanagh's labor metaphors, Heaney's poem joins contemporary concerns about mechanized agribusiness and the monocultural farming practices that starved the Irish populace in the previous century and damage the land today.



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## Roads

The public works roads built by Irish men on relief are a particularly conspicuous recurring icon of the Famine. They feature, for instance, in these lines from the opening poem of Eavan Boland's 1994 collection *In a Time of Violence*, "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited":

Relief Committees gave  
the starving Irish such roads to build.

Where they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down  
the map of this island, it is never so  
I can say here is  
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor  
an ingenious design which persuades a curve  
into a plane,  
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cried hunger  
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress  
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (1994, 7)

The line that is missing from the map—that could represent the lives lost to Famine—is inscribed in the line of her poem, not by its presence but by absence, an absence that, as Hirsch, Kelleher, and others have noted, is itself the marker of trauma.<sup>22</sup> Boland cannot render visible the lives lost while building these roads any more than the map can render the spherical as flat. Rather than attempt the ingenious representational design of standing for what is absent in an act of mimesis, she creates a place within the poem, in the space between lines, which testifies to absence and loss. Deferring meaning, rerouting it through maps that are incomplete, by roads that are inadequate memorials, Boland indicates her distance from the direct experience of the Famine's tragedy, and the extent of that distance registers the magnitude of the tragedy. The end of the road marks the end of the lives of the men who built it, an



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end marked too by the enjambment of the lines that describe that end: "Where they died, the road ended // and ends still." Set apart on the page, in its own stanza, the first of these lines evokes the line absent from the map, the silence into which the map's missing line, the road in the woods, and the human voice or consciousness disappears, a silence that cannot be filled by the poet's attempt to represent, to speak to or for.<sup>23</sup>

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "Old Roads" (1991) also draws on the iconography of Famine roads to address a tension between past and present, history and memory. Like Boland, she notes that Famine roads are "missing from the map" and, further, that they are overgrown, indistinguishable from the surrounding pasture land. Despite addressing a historical subject, the poem sketches an immediate relation to Famine death, the poet's present time colliding with the ancestral past:

And if, an odd time, late  
 At night, a cart passes  
 Splashing in a burst stream, crunching bones,  
 The wavering candle hung by the shaft  
 Slaps light against a single gable  
 Catches a flat tombstone  
 Shaking a nervous beam in a white face. (1991, 27)

During the worst years of the Famine, farm families evicted from their homes for lack of rent money were forced to travel, seeking food and medical help, and many died along the rudimentary roads of Ireland. Describing his visit to Connaught in 1847, for example, James Hack Tuke wrote: "Several car and coach drivers have assured me that they rarely drove anywhere without seeing dead bodies strewn along the road side, and that in the dark they had even gone over them" (quoted in Ó Murchadha 2011, 81). Though these remains are long gone, the traveler in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, whose bones crunch at the impact of road bumps, is reminded by a flat tombstone of the horrors of driving over the dead. This partially obscured memorial acts as a static reminder of the lost past, while the poem attempts against the passage of time to preserve the living continuity between historical event and present circumstance. "Old Roads" thus produces cultural memory as present to contemporary conditions and challenges, while at the same time rehearsing the impossibility of gaining access to the past in the metaphoric tread over tombstones and bones, a potent figure of forgetting reinforced in the next stanza:



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Their arthritic fingers  
 Their stiffening grasp cannot  
 Hold long on the hillside—  
 Slowly the old roads loose their grip.<sup>24</sup>

Indicating a potentially corrupting connection to a national past, here the poet sees the roads as aging hands, struggling to maintain their grip on the countryside as the past maintains its grip on the present. The roads do lose their grip, however, subsiding into the mythos of cultural memory in which events are shaped to serve present concerns. While the past here, as for Berkeley and MacCarthy, is ephemeral, ebbing away over time, its “stiffening grasp” nonetheless tries to keep a desperate hold on the present. As in Kavanagh, the past threatens to lay its rigid claim on the contemporary.

Medbh McGuckian’s “Filming the Famine” (2002) reflects on the myriad films made to commemorate the Famine’s sesquicentenary.<sup>25</sup> Like those discussed above, this poem contemplates history, but it also reflects on questions of place, serving to unite not only the present with history but also the Northern provinces with the Irish diaspora. Once again the Famine roads become a crucial point of reference, as McGuckian describes “mass paths and other useless roads, / devastated by street battles” (2002, 26). Seeing Ireland as “an island that had lived through / two famines,” McGuckian envisions a unity in island geography but also in shared history, connecting the Famine to more recent political crises, particularly to the hunger strikes of the 1980s. Taking the Famine as a historical marker, she opens a broad vision of Ireland that includes both North and South and also island and diaspora. The “useless roads,” then, draw together several layers of history: the work-relief projects scattered across Ireland as unmarked memorials to the Famine are paired with scenes of “street battles” that signify the successive military efforts for independence as well as the Irish civil war and the Northern Irish troubles. In such pairings, the extremity of the Famine underlies the successive military campaigns. The network of Famine roads provides a location for filming Irish history, the many documentaries, moreover, participating in the production of cultural memory by which the Famine is figured as a defining effect in the present.



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## Ships

McGuckian's metatextual reflection on the failures of representation, both aesthetic and political, unsettles received histories of the island. Writing about another of the icons of the Famine, the coffin ships that dispersed the survivors in their millions in that "spring that has carried the steely dusk into my heart," McGuckian in "Filming the Famine" lists the names of ships and the occupations of the people they carried away. "Brickmakers and coal-heavers" were perhaps among the less skilled and less privileged among Irish workers who merge into

people without end  
 slid together in a cell of false time,  
 a summer of sorrow,  
 flat lines of darker black  
 in the sunken inkpots

McGuckian writes the ships as inkpots, inert materials to be transformed into the poetry of memory or "false time." Where for Boland the poetic line evokes the line of the map and the line of the Famine road, in McGuckian's poetic line we see the lines of lost people she preserves only by marking them as lost—individuals amassed on the ships' decks as flattened lines, darker spots in a receding vessel. And like the waves over which the coffin ships recede in the past, present Famine memory surges and subsides, powerful but ebbing and flowing.

Like many Famine poems, McGuckian's lines are shadowed by a sense of responsibility and even guilt. The waves that bore away the coffin ships, and the waves of present memory, also form with "the perfect circle of his lips" consuming "my meal of pleasure," a meal that is meant for more than mere sustenance. The implication is that each meal shared for pleasure in the present can be described, in the reverse logic of cultural memory, as one of which previous generations were deprived. Each pleasurable meal is one that cannot sustain lives lost in the 1840s. Today the island is "winter fruit," another name for a potato, edible in the present, while it was indigestible in the famished past.

In representing Famine history, "Filming the Famine" turns to montage. Composing narrative from the collection of fragments that constitute the Famine archive, montage, like memory, works to assemble a whole from disparate parts. While the Famine itself is both too diffuse and too pervasive to allow a coherent narrative whole, film montage, again



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like memory, preserves the fragmentation while producing an illusion of coherence. But it is also a "screen against sight" in two senses: it may be projected onto a screen or hidden behind a screen, and thus filming the Famine, like writing about it, conceals or screens as much as it preserves or recreates. In this way McGuckian's poem represents the Famine as lost and fragmented but, at the same time, as an active, present part of contemporary experience.

Boland, too, explores her historical distance from survivors of the Famine and the extent to which memory both screens and projects. "In a Bad Light" (1994) memorializes coffin ships, presenting a troubled version of this familiar icon of Irish diaspora, thus expanding the geography of the Famine to encompass the memories of Ireland's exiles. Structured by deferral, the narrative is always at one remove from lived experience, sympathetic but unable to inhabit a Famine survivor's experience, reflecting what Catriona Clutterbuck sees as Boland's "necessary dilemma of representative authority in recovering the voice of the Other, as she brings that voice from outside to inside history" (2005, 72). The past and present are layered together, a palimpsest of cultural memory, its imperatives and its failures.

"In a Bad Light" describes a visit to a museum in St. Louis where the poem's speaker (a tourist in the United States) sees an exquisite silk dress worn by an American woman on a boat cruise in the 1860s. Writing from a moment of temporary exile in America, where the peculiar light of autumn inspires nostalgia for fall in the Dublin mountains, Boland disrupts the straightforward version of cultural memory tourists embody in posing with the Gillespie sculptures, while recognizing the nostalgia of permanent exiles:

The weather must be cold now in Dublin.  
And when skies are clear, frosts come  
down on the mountains and the first  
inklings of winter will be underfoot in  
the crisp iron of a fern at dawn. (Boland 1994, 12)

Looking into a glass case at a mannequin that "represents a woman in a dress" made in 1860, at the inception of the American Civil War, the tourist imagines she might see a reflection of her own body in the glass imposed over the mannequin within the case, a doubling that figures cultural memory as the position of identification from which Boland writes the poem. Insofar as the speaker's reflection is imposed



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over the figure in the dress, that palimpsest also presents the danger of identification masking imposition, that writing about the past will involve writing over it. The doubling of figure and reflection suggests a sense of immediacy in the experience—the glass case gives the poet transparent access to a historical moment—but the glass is also a barrier, a separation that, like the passage of time, makes access impossible.

Writing between accessibility and separation, Boland cannot represent the point of view of the permanent exile.<sup>26</sup> Representation itself is parodied when she describes the plastic mannequin in the third stanza whose function it is to “represent” a woman who once moved within the dress the mannequin now merely holds up. Adapting Nora’s terms, Andrew Auge argues that rather than herself “representing,” Boland “registers” the past “as a residue or trace that disrupts rather than consolidates present consciousness” (2004, 130).

At the center of the poem is an act of reading and of interpretation. Presumably the poet gets her information about this dress by reading the museum’s showcase label (“A notice says no comforts were spared”), and her attention is arrested by the casual observation there: “The seamstresses are Irish.” The “residue or trace” of an Irish exile is here registered only by her representational absence; she is the victim of “history’s abandonment,” precisely the figure that Boland makes it her poetic responsibility to remember. She sees in this trace the Irish seamstress leaves of Famine’s deprivation, a history that would bring an Irish woman to gas-lit, American rooms and the labor of sewing a garment whose very glamour masks the bitterness of her experience:

I see them in the oil-lit parlours.  
I am in the gas-lit backrooms.  
We make in the apron front and from  
the papery appearance and crushable  
look of crepe, a sign. We are bent over

in a bad light. We are sewing a last  
sight of shore. We are sewing coffin ships.  
And the salt of exile.<sup>27</sup> And our own  
death in it. For history’s abandonment  
we are doing this. And this. And

this is a button hole. This is a stitch.  
Fury enters them as frost follows



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every arabesque and curl of a fern: this is  
the nightmare. See how you perceive it.  
We sleep the sleep of exhaustion. (Boland 1994, 12–13)

The Irish seamstresses stitch into these dresses the last sight of a country from which they are exiled by Famine; they also suture into the glamorous garment (to be worn on an elegant steamboat) the horrific experience of travel on the infamous coffin ships.<sup>28</sup> Contextualizing the scene as “1860, nearly war,” the poem indicates the possible duration of their exile (the largest number of refugees left during the worst year of the Famine, 1847), and also reminds readers of the American Civil War and, by extension, the transatlantic slave trade. These lines evoke a connection between conditions on the Irish coffin ships and those on the ships that brought African slaves to America. Rather than producing a scale of comparative suffering, Boland’s gesture indicates that the Irish situation is not unique and promotes thereby a transnational and cross-cultural bond of responsibility.

While the white American’s dress is beautifully, carefully crafted, gorgeously trapping the good light of another autumn day, it carries within it a history of production that is horrifying. As Christy Burns notes, “Labor that produces beauty is more intensely silenced and erased, not even left as an emblematic trace in many histories” (2001, 229), but the seamstresses’s labor also points to others who labor unseen in horrific conditions—the conditions of possibility for this dress and the river voyage on which it is worn. As we see the seamstresses, we see the agricultural labor that harvested the crops, the factory labor that wove the fabric, and the manual labor that fed the steamship’s hungry engine. Boland’s poem mirrors in the implicit narrative of its own composition this seeing of the unseen. Inverting the experience of *seeing* the dress in order to show the labor of *making* it, at the same time she presents us with an inverted poem in which we can see that labor reproduced in the act of writing; the poem reveals the means of its own production.

Beginning with a preparation for insight fostered by nostalgia, the poem moves to a moment of strong identification: “I see them in the oil-lit parlours. / I am in the gas-lit backrooms. . . . We are sewing a last / sight of shore. We are sewing coffin ships. / And the salt of exile.” Oscillating between the rhetoric of identification and the recognition of difference, on a formal level the shuttling of her lines—back and forth between indentation and left justification—reproduces the shuttling back



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and forth of the stitch on the buttonhole, the back and forth of waves carrying the coffin ship, slave ship, or steamboat, and the shuttling back and forth of experience and memory, of exile and home.

At the midpoint of the poem, Boland shifts pronouns from the first-person singular to the first-person plural—"We make," "We are bent over," "We are sewing a last / sight of shore. We are sewing coffin ships"—as the poem presents a unified perspective shared by the exiles of the nineteenth century, the temporary exile of the twentieth, and even the reader. This shift registers the discourse of cultural memory, the haunting of present generations with the tragedy of the past, yet as the poem draws to its close and the increasing fury of its perspective escalates its rhythms (manifested by increasingly truncated syntax and increased enjambment), a split between "you" and "we" emerges, clarifying the difference in experience, understanding, and perspective: "this is / the nightmare. See how you perceive it. / We sleep the sleep of exhaustion." As the indefinite apostrophe at the close of the poem distances both reader and poet from the experience of the seamstresses, the poem reaches the limit of cultural memory, a limit Anne Fogarty locates in any impulse "to restore a sense of completion to a history which is defined by loss and fracture" (1999, 271). In this way, Boland here indicates the appropriations implicit in her earlier identification, presenting a critique of a notion of cultural memory that would claim an accessible continuity with the past.

Boland's Famine poem thus registers memory through the failure of mimesis: in the fragile though versatile form of her lyric poem, she suggests the contours of calamity through the "volatile record" of a series of private worlds inhabited by imagined women. Each private tragedy is itself so powerful as to defy representation, "In a Bad Light" suggests; the accumulation and scale of tragedies during the Famine years ultimately exceeds the desire to transform historical experience into a stable or unified cultural memory.

## Hunger

Like McGuckian's "Filming the Famine," Katie Donovan's "Hunger at Doolough" (1997) also concerns a feeling of guilt that inhibits the pleasure of eating, an effect of cultural memory that triggers present political responsibility. Beginning with the familiar story of the landed gentry's indifference to pervasive starvation during the Famine years, the poem sets out to explore the continuities between that past and the



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present through metaphors of consumption: present figures drink from a lake “full of skeletons, / from the hundreds who trod the famine walk” (1997, 11), a drinking that for the poet opens an elusive connection to the past. As a contemporary group travels a road possibly built through relief efforts, such drinking becomes metaphorical:

We drink it now:  
the lake, the long green sides  
of the valley, the flinty rock  
and curling mists.  
We drive the quiet road,  
and fill up on tranquility;  
we bloat with the view,  
thanking our luck  
we are the only ones here,  
and have it for ourselves.

If the repetition of “we” at the beginning of four lines indicates collective experience, the sense of continuity with past verities is ruptured as metaphors of eating and gluttony on a view contrast present luxuries with the deprivations of the 1840s, recalling the bloated abdomens of the starving who *actually* tried to eat the view, desperately feeding themselves with grass they could not properly digest. At the stanza’s end we see that the view’s aesthetic value derives from its emptiness, its isolation. But that emptiness is also a material trace of the Famine: of the reduction of population throughout Ireland from death and emigration.<sup>29</sup> Concluding with the word “ourselves,” the stanza offers a reminder of that collective experience and carries also the suggestion of the nationalist slogan “*Sinn Féin Amhain*” or “ourselves alone,” a militant call for independence in the Irish language, adopted at various times for purposes both “narrow” and “tribal.”

Donovan’s following stanza suggests that the political resolution of independence was not a sufficient solution to indigenous poverty. The poem’s local farmers still cannot survive on the land and, in a perverse echo of the Famine metaphors of the previous stanza, complain, “You can’t eat scenery.” As they are compelled to sell to mining companies whose works threaten to blight the indigestible landscape by figuratively eating into the ground, the poem looks back to Heaney’s mechanized labor and to Kavanagh’s unsentimental version of cultural memory: the inheritance of Famine here is the continuing threat of loss and the failure of sustenance. The cultural memory of Famine thus presents itself



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in a demand for glut in the “strip-mining company” whose mechanical “hungry claw” eats into the hillside, in the farmer selling land to satisfy present need, and in the poet and her companions remaining “not satisfied / by the panoramic meal,” though “biting in and quaffing down, / we find only a bitter taste/ of greed” (12). Repeating Kavanagh’s focus on the compulsions of hunger, Donovan stresses how they preempt both imaginative nourishment and ecological sustainability. Her poem resists memorial sentiment where it may corrupt both the rigors of history and the possibility of engagement in the present concerns of environmental stewardship made more urgent by the historic burdens of poverty and Famine.

Patrick Cotter’s “Famine Fugue” (1995) also links Famine memory with contemporary Irish global and ecological responsibility, marking the obligations of historical memory in two conspicuous ways. First, approximating the musical form of the fugue prompts the insistent reiteration of motifs, replicating the unstable recurrence of cultural memory.<sup>30</sup> Second, in taking up what Andreas Huyssen calls “usable pasts” (2003, 18), the poem provokes a sense of responsibility or political connection to global, contemporary Famine conditions, the history of Irish hunger leading the poet to transnational concerns.<sup>31</sup> An homage to Paul Celan’s Holocaust poem “Death Fugue” (1947), Cotter’s poem labels as genocidal both the Irish Famine in the 1840s and the 1982 Reagan Administration’s policy, in which “food aid is our most powerful weapon” (Cotter 1995, 205):

Parched earth of daybreak we eat you at sundown  
 we eat you at noon in the morning we eat you at night  
 we eat you and we eat you<sup>32</sup>  
 a man lives in a whitehouse your peroxide hair nancy baby  
 your ashen hair nkomo buddy he slithers with the rattlers  
 he calls out so sweetly play death death is a mistress from my  
     apple economy  
 he calls out more darkly now to your dance brother then as dust  
     you will settle in the ground

Reagan’s defining food aid as weaponry is registered here through familiar metaphors linking sustenance and mortality: the biblical apple of temptation and a fairy tale’s poisoned apple are held out to a starving population who will eat desperately and endure the mortal consequences. In the place of the colonial politics of the great hunger, against the genocidal ideology of the Nazi death machine, the machinations of globalization threaten Cotter’s emaciated figures with “multinationals”



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that promise relief and ensure death. Written in the broad strokes of political polemic, Cotter's poem challenges the comforts of morally certain, established, and stable cultural memory with a national memory of Famine that incurs present, global responsibility. The idea that a food supply would be manipulated to serve an abstract ideological agenda and ensure political compliance provokes the poem's moral outrage and its daringly controversial invocation of the Holocaust.<sup>33</sup> Like Boland's allusion to American slavery, Cotter's to the Holocaust serves not to compare scales of suffering but, by invoking cultural memory, to raise an alarm in the present.

With the contrapuntal repetition of the phrase, "we eat you," Cotter pairs those who go hungry (what is eaten in the poem is either "parched earth" or "a grave") with the powerful American president's voracious consumption of those who are weakened and subjugated. The starvation of an African figure whose hair is bleached by malnutrition ("your ashen hair nkomo buddy") is paired with the rabid consumption of an American political elite embodied in the bleached-blond figure of Nancy Reagan ("your peroxide hair nancy baby") whose beauty effects are replicated with ugly irony in the emaciated, bleached-out, and voiceless figure of the famine hungry.

The Famine politics of colonial administration in the nineteenth century gives way to the genocidal politics of fascism in the mid-twentieth century and the Famine politics of Empire (to use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's [2000] term) in the late twentieth century. Local populations are not spared in Cotter's critique, however; alluding to Joshua Nkomo, Cotter points to internal Zimbabwean political struggles and the assassination of Nkomo by his political rival, Robert Mugabe, during the proxy wars of the Cold War 1980s. And Mugabe's reliance on support from North Korea in his military campaign for national dominance once again points to the transnational complexities of local hunger.

## Conclusion

The emergence of Ireland's Famine history into cultural memory has produced an invigorating vision of a collective both transnational and globally engaged. Writing in a tradition established by Kavanagh, contemporary Irish poets participate in this cultural memory project, embodied visually in memorial installations such as Rowan Gillespie's in



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Dublin. This installation, while eliding the specificities of Famine history, evokes migration in the statues' implied movement toward the nearby docks and shipyards and beyond Ireland's shores to the international diaspora. The statues embody the transformation of history into publicly shared and evolving cultural memory, the process through which the past makes its claims on present lives and current commitments. Contemporary Irish Famine poetry, in partial contrast, insists not only on the historic specificity of this national catastrophe but on its implications for global responsibility, presenting in Famine memory both a richly diasporic vision of Irishness and a complexly conceived version of the nation within a web of transnational commitments.



Marian Eide is associate professor of English and director of Women's and Gender Studies at Texas A&M University. She is author of *Ethical Joyce* as well as a dozen articles on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. She is currently revising a book manuscript concerned with violence and aesthetics.

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## Notes

1. I employ the convention of capitalizing the word "Famine" in order to indicate the enormity of the 1840s events as distinguished from earlier, more contained experiences of famine in Ireland.
2. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald (2013) observes that Gillespie's work is among the most visible of the hundred or more memorials built in the last quarter century. She presents a detailed history of this particular sculptural group in the context of her excellent analysis of Irish Famine memorial culture. According to Margaret Kelleher, "the sculptural work takes its inspiration in part from an account in the *Irish Quarterly Review* of 1851: 'A procession fraught with the most striking and most melancholy interest, wending its painful and mournful way along the whole line of the river, to where the beautiful pile of the Custom House is distinguishable in the far distance'" (2002, 262).



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3. Mark-Fitzgerald notes the history of “horror and shame” (2013, 1) surrounding the Famine and the reversal of this shame in the memorial culture that reached its peak in the mid-1990s (when many of the poems referenced here were written and published).
4. The trouble with memorial culture more generally, as Charles Maier argues, may be that it signifies “a retreat from transformative politics” (1993, 150). Historical specificity may be lost to memorial psychology and with it the possibility of specific civic action or engagement.
5. I am deeply indebted to Kevin Whelan’s (2004) account of these debates.
6. While there is an extensive library of Irish-language poetry, my focus is on poetry in English because this language is both colonial and diasporic, registering in itself some of the poetry’s concerns of transnational cultural memory.
7. James Byrne (2012) presents a compelling analysis of the nostalgia that adheres to Irish-American memorial projects.
8. Andreas Huyssen notes that “cultures of memory are intimately linked . . . [to] struggles for human rights” (2003, 27) but implies that these cultures and struggles occur within boundaries defined by national histories. Irish memory culture expands borders to diaspora, and its sense of responsibility follows these varying lines of migration geographically and poetically.
9. According to the higher estimates, the Famine killed approximately a quarter of the Irish population. Recent histories by Cormac Ó Gráda (1999) and James S. Donnelly (2001) estimate *excess* mortality at over one million dead. These historians have collectively altered historical understanding of the Famine, drawing on new econometric method and extensive archival reference. Whelan’s account of shifts in Famine historiography carefully traces the substance of the historical debates.
10. See Green 1984 for an excellent overview of the Famine context.
11. See Mokyr 1983, 7–9.
12. See Ó Gráda 1999, 72, and Daly 1995, 124–33.
13. Joel Mokyr’s groundbreaking quantitative analysis shifted historical analysis of the causes of starvation, disease, and emigration (Mokyr 1983, 7–9). Mokyr’s views are based on a painstaking accumulation of evidence, meticulously analyzed. His view has set the standard among historians addressing the Famine.
14. Whelan notes that recent methodological advances in historical research yielded conclusions regarding the Famine that tended to support earlier, Irish



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nationalist histories of the period. He expresses a widely accepted assessment when he cites the “pathbreaking study” by “Chicago-based Dutch-Israeli scholar, Joel Mokyr,” which “lit up the subdued Famine historiography with cliometric pyrotechnics, delivered with considerable skill” (2004, 202). Mokyr’s conclusions were supported by subsequent international scholarship—presumably free of the ideological imperatives of the first Famine histories—published by Donnelly (in New York) and Peter Solar (in Belgium). In the 1990s, Ó Gráda (1999) reviewed Irish-language sources while implementing economic analysis to confirm the historical work published abroad.

15. For extensive discussion of the Famine roads, see Daly 1995 and Kelleher 1995.

16. See Green 1984.

17. See Mokyr 1983, 267. Robert Whyte (1994) kept a moving journal during his 1847 coffin ship journey. Peter Gray’s *The Irish Famine* (1995) provides a historical account of the emigrant ships.

18. Michael Rothberg (2010) presents a compelling critique of Nora’s distinction between memory and history, especially in light of France’s colonial project. Oona Frawley (2011a) argues that *lieux de memoire* are less accessible in postcolonial contexts where indigenous history may not be preserved by colonial administration, adding weight to the import of memory efforts where, as Jan Assman argues, the “past only comes into being insofar as we refer to it” (2006, 17).

19. Published in 1942, Kavanagh’s poem stretches my claim about poetry that is “contemporary.” However, the problem he introduces in “The Great Hunger”—the payment in the present for historical loss—sets the question addressed by the following generations of writers.

20. Kavanagh’s poem counters Yeats’s influential version of the Irish experience in the previous generation. Yeats presented the peasant in harmony with the landscape and connected to indigenous myth. Kavanagh’s georgic lampoons that Irish pastoral:

One day he saw a daisy and he thought it  
Reminded him of his childhood—  
He stopped his cart to look at it.  
Was there a fairy hiding behind it?     (1964, 46)

21. Indicating the frequency with which “the unspeakable,” a cataclysmic event that defies description, is characterized as female, Margaret Kelleher writes that, transnationally, “throughout famine representations, female images are chosen



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to represent famine's worst consequences, in characterizations ranging from heroic self-sacrifice to 'monstrous' perversions of 'Nature'" (1997, 239).

22. Kelleher reads the line missing from the map differently: "Famine roads will not be found in the 'map of the island' . . . yet their 'lines' are retraced, memorably in Boland's own" (1995, 247).

23. Boland remarks: "I'm interested in making a distinctive line, as any poet is. In this century that means playing the voice against the line in different ways. . . . I've been interested in how you could speak through, not with, the line. . . . So I take a line and try to push some of the voice against the line; I don't push it so hard that I destabilize the line. . . . I often try in a poem to pause the sound while allowing the sense to continue" (Olander 1997, 6).

24. Deborah Sarbin sees Famine roads as a "spatial metaphor" that "emphasizes the greater power of nature's time, stressing the fleeting quality of all things made human" (1993, 92).

25. The most acclaimed of these films is the RTÉ four-part documentary, *When Ireland Starved*.

26. Stef Craps (2010) indicates Boland's particular, recurring concern with Famine's subaltern.

27. The Irish word *deorai* means exile and one who has experienced tears.

28. Anne Shiffrer notes that these "Irish seamstresses may be furious about the estranged uses to which their labor is put, but they are also seduced by imagery of feminine beauty" (2001, 339).

29. Famine is a repeated, if unstated backdrop in Michael Longley's poetry. In an interview with Jody Allen Randolph, he notes that in "Carrigskeewaun" the emptiness of the landscape is populated by the memory of Famine: "The landscape is haunted by grown-over potato-drills, the ghosts of lazy-beds abandoned during the Famine" (Longley 2003, 307).

30. The fugue was initially a choral form whose basic principle was the imitative counterpoint of alternating and overlapping voices. In the fugue form, a theme is stated first in one voice and then repeated in each of the other choral voices. Passages in the fugue are built on a motif, a short phrase derived from the subject or basic musical structure or melody. The motif is repeated and varied in each of the choral voices.

31. Huyssen argues that cultural memory engages the "perilous task of taking responsibility for the past" in the context of present politics, thus rendering it a "usable past" (2003, 16, 18).



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32. Celan's line reads: "Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening" (1980).

33. Longley also makes connections between Famine and the Holocaust in his poem "Ghetto" when in the fifth section he lists "everything I know about potatoes" as if in retrospect, as Richard Russell notes, "offering a catalog of Irish potato names" (2010, 156) to feed the starving ghetto dweller of the 1940s with food that could survive the 1840s in Ireland if "resistant to eelworm / Resignation, common scab, terror, frost, potato-blight" (Longley 1991, 42). Longley compares "The Cairn at Dooaghtry" with deaths at Terezín, memorializing innumerable children who "lie under the cairn, unhallowed souls,"

Whose playground should be the duach and the dunes.  
No higher than little children walking on tiptoe  
Past SS guards at the selections in Terezín,  
The cairn has become a scree, the scree a landslide  
And a raised beach the memorial to all of them. (44)

In "Memory and Acknowledgement," Longley also notes the delicacy with which lines between Famine and Holocaust must be drawn: "To equate the Famine with the Holocaust is to devalue both" (1995, 157). He worries also that memory of Famine is politicized to serve communal or sectarian aims.

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# Behind a Pane of Glass: Collective Memory in Woolf's Interwar London

Irene Yoon

Shop windows, car windows, house windows, ground-glass skylights, looking glasses, prosthetic eyes, lumps on the beach, fragments on the street, mantelpiece decor: the ubiquity of glass in Woolf's work offers us a prismatic reflection of the medium's centrality to nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of modernity. Critics have fixated on the very "thingness" of glass, its object-status, or the conditions of its materiality, situating Woolf's work within high modernist or wartime anxiety about either the breakability of glass or its scarcity in early twentieth-century urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> Some, alternatively, have highlighted the metaphorical implications of Woolf's use of glass, evocative of "moments of creative intensity," a figuration for the "reciprocal fusion between the perceiver and the perceived" (Lee 1984, 16) in her modernist experiments with consciousness, or even for art itself.<sup>2</sup> The split between material readings and metaphorical ones underscores glass's own paradoxical condition as medium and barrier, lens and object, the invisible thing making visible things. It highlights, as Judith Brown points out, how "blankness isn't, after all, identical to nothing" but "merely comes to represent nothing through the emptiness of its surface" (2008, 615). It also invites interrogation in light of the recent call to "take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts . . . what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (Best and Marcus 2009, 9). But what do we do with the very surface that makes it impossible to look at *without* seeing through? What depths, if not those of "hidden, repressed" meanings, might lingering on the glass surfaces of Woolf's texts reveal?<sup>3</sup>



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In this essay, I argue that Woolf plays with the perceptual oscillation between surface and depth that glass affords to demonstrate the limits and possibilities of temporal, spatial, and intersubjective relations in interwar London. Glass in some of Woolf's earlier work—as Elizabeth Outka's (2009) and Bill Brown's (1999) readings of *Night and Day* (1919) and "Solid Objects" (1920), respectively, attest—draws our attention to the omnipresence of a certain glaring absence, that of World War I. All the more remarkable for the fact that the two texts, as both critics emphasize, were written in 1918, during or very shortly after the war, her "strategy of avoidance" by turns "reflected central cultural tropes from the war years . . . responding not simply to Woolf's anxieties but to anxieties shared by the larger culture" (Outka 2009, 150) and provided "an account of the aesthetic . . . that is a history of the senses fundamentally altered by the facts of wartime scarcity and postwar depression" (B. Brown 1999, 4). In her later work, glass continues to reveal the seeming transitivity between individuals and a larger culture through which anxieties are shared and senses altered, but it does so with the key difference of shifted vantage points in time. Woolf eventually brings the war up to the surface of her texts through characters like veteran Septimus Warren Smith, but in doing so she raises questions not only of individuals' and their larger culture's avoidance but also of their memories. In other words, Woolf's evocations of glass still alert us in a sense to the war's absence, but now that absence is not a matter of its *being over there* as much as it is its *being over*.

Paying particular attention to scenes of memory in the changing urban streetscape of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and in her own unfinished memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (1941), I read Woolf's narrative strategies and use of glass in particular as nuancing both modernism's relation to its Victorian antecedents in art and architecture and contemporaneous developments in the understanding of collective memory. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the long-standing technology of glass manufacturing was "radically overhauled," quickly transforming urban experience and social consciousness through the mass production of plate glass (Trotter 2011, 54). On commercial streets "between 1910 and 1919 . . . window displays in London were being transformed" (Outka 2009, 139), and by the 1920s and 30s, further innovations "made glass newly available in architecture above all, and newly spectacular" (Trotter 2011, 54). If in the nineteenth century the growing ubiquity of glass marked a spectacularly mediated "oppositional world" between



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seer and seen, inside and outside, twentieth-century modernism sought to leave these "labors of mediation" behind in exchange for an aesthetic of "traceless purity" (Armstrong 2008, 13). As Anne Cheng describes this early-century shift, "From aerodynamic tears to the glass wall, modern design and aesthetic philosophy remained absorbed in the idea of 'pure' surface" (2010, 11).<sup>4</sup> "Pure" modern surfaces like transparent cellophane or glass "offered the modern imagination new ways of seeing the mundane world," and sometimes even "a new way into time itself" (J. Brown 2008, 608, 616).

Walter Gropius's construction of the Bauhaus School's famous glass curtain wall in Dessau, begun the year of *Mrs. Dalloway's* publication and completed the following spring, is perhaps the definitive realization of this high modernist investment. Its design permits "interior and exterior to be seen simultaneously," creating an experience of "various levels of reference, or of points of references, and simultaneity" (Giedion 1977, 489). Glass here enacts for the individual spectator what Sigfried Giedion thus called in 1941 the architectural realization of "the conception of space-time" in the manner of Picasso's *L'Arlesienne* (1937). Offering viewers outside the building the fantastical possibility of not only seeing fully into the interior but, furthermore, of seeing out again through the opposite side from an insider's perspective, the glass wall also approximates what I would call the architectural realization of modernist free indirect discourse, in which, as Jennifer Wicke puts it, "People may not *know* one another's thoughts in telepathic communication, but they *are* one another's thoughts; whatever order there is to consciousness arrives in the momentary interconnections of inchoateness" (1994, 12). Immersion in the transitivity implied in all three forms would also depend on a new, "modern viewer, one who is simultaneously aware of and seduced by the vision behind the glass" (Outka 2009, 148), one who, in the case of the Bauhaus wall, for example, would be both conscious of and momentarily inattentive to the intervening artifice of the extensive steel latticework holding all that transparency together. In short, at the time Woolf was writing, glass enjoyed a kind of celebrity as the medium of modernism, enabling in architecture the desired spatializing and temporalizing effects of modernist innovation in the visual and verbal arts. It seemingly did so at the cost of the previous century's preoccupation with the mediation and intersubjective relations glass occasioned.

While twentieth-century modernism valorized the individual experience of "pure formal aesthetic transitivity" and "traceless



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purity,” the Victorian era encountered glass—in its novel ubiquity and oft-marred transparency—as the fraught medium through which “individual experience takes a social form” (Armstrong 2008, 14). The transition between these two glass cultures occurs not just in high art but in quotidian experiences of commerce as well. By the 1910s and 20s, shoppers wandering the streets of London looked through glass that “emphasized fantasy . . . and that de-emphasized both the commercial exchange and sense of mass production” (Outka 2009, 139). Through these windows, modern consumers see not other people or other things (i.e., salespeople or goods) but, rather, “different views of possible selves, obtainable for a price” (137). Edgar Allan Poe’s emblematic nineteenth-century Man of the Crowd, pressed against the glass, seeing others and being seen across a dirty pane with “marks on the surface, scratches, fingerprints” (Armstrong 2008, 14), gives way to the single subject’s enhanced vision through the expansive transparency of glass, what David Trotter calls “the embodiment of the International Style’s vision of the radiant city of the future” (2011, 53).

Given Woolf’s exploration of glass transparency in her own work, however, this distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century glass aesthetics—much like the glass that characterizes it—is not always so clear. The “traceless purity” of glass, emblematic of both “a historical condition and aesthetic ideal” (J. Brown 2008, 617), allows, at least theoretically, for modernist art capable of overcoming the separation of “time or space . . . as well as intersubjective distance” (Mao 1998, 54). In the early twentieth century, the transparency of modern materials like glass becomes “close to the idea of the instantaneous” (or “simultaneity” in Giedion’s account), a way to mobilize the temporal multiplicity of the present—that is, a kind of “Bergsonian . . . overlaying [of] past, present, and future in a single and simultaneous moment” (J. Brown 2008, 616).<sup>5</sup> Woolf may have found this possibility compelling, but glass in her work also always asserts itself as a limiting factor, a material surface that opens up the recognition of such opportunities while simultaneously foreclosing them.<sup>6</sup> That is, the blankness of its transparent surface may *represent* a nonexistent barrier, as Woolf and Judith Brown both remind us, but it isn’t nonexistent: it exists, it is there, and for all of its illusory absence it still materially intervenes and physically separates. Recognizing this becomes more urgent when one considers that for Woolf’s generation the past that is overlaid by the present and future is saturated with the often inscrutable experiences of the First World War. Woolf’s deployment of glass in the 1920s and 30s



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may, like her earlier words, call attention to anxieties about allowing the wartime past to permeate our sense of the present and future—but here it speaks to the clear allure and necessity of it too. It continues to raise questions of the transitivity between individual and collective experience, but it increasingly does so in tandem with questions regarding contemporaneous notions of collective memory. In other words, calling attention to glass's presence while constantly invoking the seduction of transparency and the “beauty . . . behind a pane of glass” (Woolf 2005, 96)<sup>7</sup> becomes essential to Woolf's own temporally inflected exploration of how “individual experience takes a social form” (Armstrong 2008, 14).

The year of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s publication and the Bauhaus wall's construction also saw the release of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's foundational *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), which popularized notions of memory's inherently social construction and function. If, as Halbwachs claims, “every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework,” such that “we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings” (1992, 6–7), Woolf's exploration of Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Warren Smith's individual memories via glass on the streets of London complicates our sense both of what constitutes the collective and of what constitutes the “past” in the first place. Or, put in terms of the longer-standing tradition of the memory arts, if “an art which uses contemporary architecture for its memory places and contemporary imagery for its images will have its classical, Gothic, and Renaissance periods, like other arts” (Yates 1992, 11), Woolf asks us to consider what it looks like to remember in an increasingly “transparent” modern world containing drastically splintered experiences. Glass in her work illuminates Woolf's concern with the questions that inhere in conversations about memory today: namely, what kind of access can individuals claim to have to their pasts, and how can they negotiate the necessary reckoning with others as they seek that access.

In the readings that follow, I argue that, by means of her representations of glass, Woolf negotiates the concerns of temporal, spatial, and intersubjective separation as a problem, in particular, of memory. If, as W.J.T. Mitchell proposes, “every medium constructs a corresponding zone of immediacy, of the unmediated and transparent, which stands in contrast with the medium itself” (2004, 214), glass, and the new spatial frameworks it occasions in the early twentieth century, complicate such distinctions by blurring the bounds between the mediated and unmediated, between the



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transparent and the visible.<sup>8</sup> Or, as Judith Brown puts it, modernism was “hardly a passive transitional period”: in it, “blankness was *both* the absence of any variety of things . . . *and also* . . . the sign of a newly ubiquitous, or a swiftly becoming ubiquitous, technological presence” (2008, 617). Woolf’s modern fiction—particularly those works written from the retrospective vantage of the interwar period—explores how the visual technology of glass and its corresponding “zone of immediacy” stage opportunities to overcome our separation from others and from our pasts, even as they physically impede the prospect that such opportunities might be realized.

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During the last two years of her life, Woolf began what one might call a double-paned project of retrospection. Shuttling between the work of Roger Fry’s biography and her own memoir, “A Sketch of the Past,” seemed at once to threaten and enable both. She writes in that memoir, “The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths” (Woolf 1985, 98), and, she continues, “the present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason—that it destroys the fullness of life—any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters. . . . I write this partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface.” This late meditation on the process of envisioning and subsequently writing the past as through a transparent, smooth, “sliding surface”—capable of easy fracture—is striking as both an evocation of glass that never names it and, as such, an oddly clear crystallization of a figure for memory that haunts much of Woolf’s oeuvre. Which is to say, while the imagery certainly also suggests any icy surface over water, the ways in which Woolf conceptualizes these *divergent* surfaces are, as we’ll see shortly, more akin to her recurrent considerations of urban glass.<sup>9</sup>

In this attempt to recapture her sense of the present through recalling her past, Woolf writes into being the perceptual experience of glass’s most salient and paradoxical characteristic: material presence in apparent absence. We begin with the image of the smooth surface of water, the indistinguishable present running like the sliding surface of a deep river—no glass in sight. But already with the present’s status as a



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"sliding surface," we observe a capacity for separation through the tactile sensation of one surface sliding over another. The event of fracture makes the material manifest: it renders the surface palpably "shallow," set apart from the river depths, accentuating the illusory quality of its former absence. To drive the point further, the shattered surface and its "hard thin splinters" visually obscure the depth beneath it, creating the near opacity of crackling. This rupture, this forced confrontation with the materiality of perceptual transparency, is what drives Woolf to respond by "writing . . . to shadow the broken surface with the past." What begins as an abstracted meditation on the experience of memory emerges as a spatial model of temporal depth mediated by glass.

The "pure" glass surface of the transparent present sliding smoothly over the depths of the past might serve as an aesthetic ideal for Woolf, but it is one that gives away almost immediately to the "extreme distress" of broken, hard, and splintered surfaces reminiscent of the "marks on the surface, scratches, fingerprints" Armstrong observes in Victorian representations of glass. The anxiety of mediation is far from absent, though here there is a noteworthy shift in axis away from the horizontal model of an individual's relation to another person, to the vertical depth of an individual's relation to another iteration of herself in time. Having broached the fragility of glass as mediating perception, Woolf proclaims her intention to write her way to some resolution. Moving away from the splintered glass, she imagines lowering herself into the stream of the past, "like a child advancing with bare feet in a cold river" (1985, 98). The figure shadowing from beyond this broken surface, it seems, will be her own, the haunting silhouette of a submerged child. But as she identifies as both the child shadowing the surface from below *and* the spectating adult writer who can see that shadow from *this side* of the present, the vision of memory is strangely bifurcated. Where for her Victorian predecessors glass signified spatial mediation between subjects, the incorporation of a temporal dimension marks Woolf's modernist innovation upon the Victorian model.

In the process, Woolf recognizes that glass may not only impede perception of her past but may also render such complex temporal perception impossible to sustain, even imaginatively. Inverting the image from "A Sketch of the Past," in her 1929 essay, "The Moment: Summer's Night," she observes that "If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old,



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the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something" (Woolf 1974, 3). Young or old, the present is always figuratively filtered through a distorting glass pane that makes it either actually "tremble and quiver" and "waver" by its physical pressure, or at least appear to do so. Where glass itself appears in "The Moment," however, the mediation of glass doesn't appear at all in Woolf's later model until this qualified transparency comes to light. Her writing at that point is as much a response to the now very visible (and furthermore obfuscating) surface as it was initially an evocation of illusory absence that allowed her to see clearly through to the depths. The conceptual possibilities of glass are thus equally bound up in its fragile materiality and in the kind of perceptions it affords. By demonstrating this, the brief passage from "A Sketch of the Past" asks us to consider how distinct the past really is from the present, how separable individuals are from each other, and what those distinctions mean for how one remembers and writes a life—one's own or anyone else's.

Where "A Sketch of the Past" builds the perceptual experience of glass out of Woolf's rumination on memory, *Mrs. Dalloway* comes at memory from the other side, building memory out of the perceptual experience of urban glass. The opening lines of the novel set the stage for the acts of memory through glass to follow. We find ourselves not consciously on Victoria Street with Clarissa experiencing "life; London; this moment of June" but rather "plunged into the open air of Bourton," Clarissa's childhood home, thirty-four years earlier (*MD* 4). Mapping the time of past and present onto the spatial coordinates of the country and the city is nothing new, of course. What is strange is the way Woolf manages—just as she does in her image of the glassed stream in "A Sketch"—both to coordinate these discrete temporal and spatial designations (past, country; present, city) and to momentarily align them so fully in the act of memory as to blur all distinction. While Clarissa's consciousness drifts to her Bourton past, her body and sensory impressions ostensibly remain in the "daylight at the present moment" (Woolf 1954, 59) in London. We don't plunge into Bourton *instead* of London, we plunge with Clarissa into the open air of both. At first glance, this foray into the past, into the "beautiful cave" behind Clarissa, resembles the kind of Bergsonian interpenetration of the past and present that the "traceless purity" of modernist glass aims to offer. But instead of flowing seamlessly from her memories to her impressions of the present moment, which come surely enough on the next page, the narrative is suddenly interrupted.



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Between Bourton and London we encounter Clarissa from the outside, through the gaze of her otherwise inconsequential neighbor Scrope Purvis. For a minute—for a brief paragraph—we glimpse Clarissa in all her physical solidity: stiff, upright, aged, birdlike, white, recently recovered from a grave illness, on the street curb, waiting for Durvall's van to cross. *Then* we find ourselves back in Clarissa's mind, inundated now not with recollections of her girlhood but the sensory stimulation of "the swing, tramp, and trudge" of the present moment, of London. Like a viewer suddenly attentive to the steel latticework holding the Bauhaus wall's expansive transparency together, the reader fleetingly confronts the divisions not only between Clarissa and her neighbor but also between Clarissa's present and her past. This momentary recourse to the outside suggests how any foray into the depths of the past, like the ecstasy of a moment's impossible passion, must ultimately run up "against a granite wall in the darkness" (35)—or, as this essay proposes, against the vexed solidity of a pane of glass. While powerful and enchanting, memory can bring the past up to the present, but it cannot ultimately turn the past *into* the present—without dire consequences, as the figure of Septimus demonstrates.

Clarissa (incorrectly) imagines she is herself "invisible; unseen; unknown," as she peers first into Hatchard's window, then a glove shop's, and finally out of Mulberry's window at the backfiring car on the street outside (10). She exults, invisible, as she supposes, "in people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge"—that is, in the anonymity, mobility, and full sensory immersion of her modern, urban *flânerie*. And, as in Woolf's later memoir, it is the sense of seemingly transparent continuity with the present moment, "this moment of June," that grants Clarissa a view into her past (4). Looking through Hatchard's window, she dreams, "trying to recover . . . [an] image of white dawn in the country," an image the reader recognizes from her opening recollection five pages earlier of an early morning at Bourton more than three decades earlier (9). Through the glove shop window, Clarissa remembers her uncle at his death, turning on his bed during the War one morning and saying, "I have had enough" (11). The recollection of her daughter's distaste for gloves propels her up Bond Street to Mulberry's, the first store she actually enters. In these early pages we thus encounter Woolf's retrospective meditation on the glass surface of the present, running habitually, smoothly over the memories of the past, transposed onto the glass surface of shop windows. At each shop window, Clarissa sees not only what is materially beyond the surface but also into



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memories of her girlhood and the more recent years of the war. What she experiences as the exhilarating anonymity of London's hustle and bustle seems at first to facilitate the "peace" Woolf identifies as necessary "to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past" (1985, 98).

But neither at the bookstore window nor at the glove shop's is this quite fully realized for Clarissa. The substance of her "dreaming as she looked into Hatchard's shop window" remains for her just out of sight, as does the answer to, "What was she trying to recover?" (9). Even as the reader is alerted to the white dawn of Bourton in Clarissa's mind, Clarissa herself never actually claims it as she looks at the books on display. Her dreaming through the glass, likewise, is abruptly cut off by the annoyance she feels at her own vanity, always wanting "that people should look pleased as she came in" (10). Perhaps, she wonders, if "she could have looked even differently!" To have "looked . . . differently" cuts, of course, two ways: in one sense, to be the one looked at, and, in the other, to be the one looking. Staged before shop windows, Clarissa's irritation—coupled with her sense of her own "narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's" and of the fact that "she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little"—is likely the result of both kinds of looking.

The dissatisfaction Clarissa feels and the impulse to project a version of herself that "looked . . . differently," despite her concession that she "dressed well, considering she spent little," evokes the now-familiar figure of the female shopper whose identity is forged in the crucible of early-century window displays, the modern consumer whose sense of stable identity breaks down in "a never-ending loop of desire, buying and dissatisfaction" (Outka 2009, 137).<sup>10</sup> But if in *Night and Day* Woolf depicts "the modern subject's longing for a return of this illusion" of stable identity via her search "for the something that might at once represent the genuine article and yet still be a modern construction," for goods "representing, constructing, and reproducing part of the past" even as they "promis[e] to bring the viewer into contact with another appealing identity," in *Mrs. Dalloway* the plate glass windows and the objects behind them now thwart rather than facilitate both of those quests. At each store window, Clarissa's present sense of invisible continuity with her past tellingly snags on the displayed goods: the very thoughts of buying Evelyn Whitbread a book and a pair of gloves for herself or Elizabeth immediately disrupt her memories and return Clarissa instead to an irritating sense of her own present vanity, to her frustration with constant self-reflection.



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Again, breaking away from the glove shop window, Clarissa's memory of her uncle's death and disillusionment with the war is disrupted by her irritation with Miss Kilman, which she acknowledges as more a hatred for the latter's insinuation that "the whole panoply of [Clarissa's] content were nothing but self love" (*MD* 12). Self-reflection mars the transparency of these opening scenes of glass mediation, just as the momentary interjection of Scrope Purvis's perspective (paralleling Clarissa's self-assessment) disturbs our sense of Clarissa's autonomous, urban anonymity and a seamlessly interpenetrating past and present. If, as Outka argues, "the glass becomes both a metaphor for and a material manifestation of the combined accessibility of the goods and the elusiveness of the aura they radiate" such that the "outside gazer could be seduced by the space behind the glass" in "a willing self-seduction" (2009, 137), that seduction has gone awry for Clarissa, who can't seem to get past her reflections on the surface.

The facile conflation of reflection in the psychological sense of introspection and the perceptual sense of light beams creating a virtual image on a reflective surface illuminates (in both senses of the word) the way in which Woolf, in her innovative evocations of glass, marries its material and metaphorical implications. As a result, like Septimus, she luxuriates in "the intoxication of words—the linguistic slide of beauty in the message hidden in the beauty of words" (*MD* 86) but also recognizes through Clarissa the familiar experience of a doubled attention to image and object. Arguably, it is this perceptual, linguistic, and imaginary slide between sensory and psychological possibilities that glass in particular so readily facilitates that makes it such an attractive figure for Woolf. The fact that Clarissa's fluid "dreaming" into the windows of Bond Street and her past breaks as she catches herself reflected—psychologically if not physically as well—effects a kind of obfuscation analogous to that produced by the broken surface Woolf later finds so distressing. Reflection, like breakage, manifests glass's materiality as a barrier marking Clarissa an outsider. Put simply, catching a reflection is a sure way to know glass is there.

The shiny Bond Street windows may persist in highlighting the desirability of the material objects beyond the glass, but the power of those objects to evoke the illusion of a kind of stable identity, in which the prewar past and postwar present could successfully cohere, no longer holds. As Woolf composed *Mrs. Dalloway*, she repeatedly noted her frustration with the "glittery" quality of Clarissa herself, "too glittering



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and tinselly" (1954, 60). Her first remedy, as she describes it in her diary, was to "bring innumerable other characters to her support"; later, describing how she nearly gave up altogether "because [she still] found Clarissa in some way tinselly," Woolf writes with satisfaction, "Then I invented her memories" (77). The commercial streets of London and the vistas their windows open up may produce much of the sensory pleasure prompting Clarissa to exult in the present, "this moment of June," but their material presence and reflective quality also highlight the consequences when Clarissa is set apart from her relation to others and to her past.

Later in the day, on Victoria Street, Peter Walsh stops to find "himself, reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer" (*MD* 47). Contrary to Clarissa even in his mode of window-shopping, Peter sees in his reflection in the glass an image of "this fortunate man" (48), an image that seems to be precisely what attracts him to the shop. Peter looks through the glass momentarily "at the great motor-cars capable of doing—how many miles on how many gallons?" but is ultimately much more preoccupied with what he sees reflected in his expatriated person: "all India . . . behind him; plains, mountains; . . . decisions he had come to alone—he, Peter Walsh." It is not that he sees his Indian past reflected in the glass but, rather, that his memories are subordinated in that reflection, rendering his self-aggrandizing visions as coextensive with his sense of his self, a belated and refracted realization of the seduction the glass windows initially offer Clarissa. While the "peace" of Clarissa's memories seems to depend on a kind of invisible continuity between herself and the displays behind glass, Peter's equanimity is contingent on facing the plate glass's reflective surface. The commercial displays that force Clarissa's unwanted self-reflection feed into Peter's enjoyment of his own as the cars remind him of the plough he had invented in his Indian district and the wheelbarrows he had ordered from England.

But the moment "a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind"—and, presumably, the moment the glass window ceases to reflect the light of the hidden sun and, with it, Peter Walsh, with it—Peter quails. The now-transparent glass reveals the past; "looking rather drearily into the glassy depths" (48), Peter is absorbed in the "deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling recollection of [Clarissa]" (49). As the church bells ring, the "glassy depths" afford Peter momentary insight into Clarissa's window-gazing and his own, as he considers how "some grief for the past holds it back; some concern for the present" (48). As the sound of the bells fades, leaving Peter alone



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to consider the fluidity of the glassy depths in uninterrupted silence, he recoils and marches up Whitehall, the political center of Britain. The vision of the past passes, "languishe[s]" (49), and Peter is left, like Clarissa in front of Hatchard's, questioning his memory: "But what room? What moment? And why had he been so profoundly happy when the clock was striking?" (50).

The feeling of anonymity Clarissa finds so comforting in the continuous motion of the city, and in looking through shop windows, imagining herself unseen by passersby (or by herself) frightens Peter. A brief moment of reconciliation between the glassy depths of the past and the smooth, transparent surface of the present clusters around "some moment of great intimacy" between him and Clarissa—the possibility of their marriage the church bells accompanying Clarissa "in white" bring to mind (49)—but as the bells remind Peter that Clarissa is ill and will, like himself, someday die, their eventual silence also leaves Peter alone to look drearily into the glassy depths of a past in which that union never materialized. During the war, as Outka argues, window displays "promise a temporal shift by representing, constructing, and reproducing part of the past, and . . . also work spatially, promising to bring the viewer into contact with another appealing identity . . . whether in the form of a romantic partner . . . or in the form of an alluring new role for the viewer" (2009, 153); after the war, such displays ultimately remind Peter that the offered promise has already been irrevocably broken. Peter thus can't look through the window any longer. He insists instead upon a false reflection, the vision of a future "roll[ing] down to him, vigorous, unending" through Whitehall, in the form of young soldiers marching to the Cenotaph, a nationalized inversion of his painful postwar realizations (*MD* 50). As they facilitate memories that Peter cannot seem to bear, the city streets, and their glass windows, highlight a *failure* of intersubjective connection, a rupture that time cannot mend.

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Depth-gazing Clarissa prides herself on slicing "like a knife through everything" and yet can't escape the feeling of being "at the same time . . . outside, looking on" (49); the expatriated Peter prides himself on his eccentricity and status as outside observer, but he can't seem to do anything with the knife that he opens and then shuts half a dozen times. Before the glass panes of Bond Street, Clarissa's exultation in her invisibility and



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sense of continuity with her past falters as she recognizes her own vanity; she still wants to be seen, to be known by and to know others. Peter's momentarily smug sense of a self powerfully making important decisions alone catches on the revelation that clear separation between oneself and others, as between the present and the past, is in actuality as false as it is momentarily triumphant.

In the pages between these two scenes of solitary window-shopping, we move into a distinctly social space of perception staged on either side of Mulberry's store window. Entering the florist's to "buy the flowers herself" (3). Clarissa once more immerses herself in a reverie of her Bourton past. Miss Pym, "who thought her kind, for kind she had been years ago" (12), immediately recognizes her. Clarissa is as she was "years ago": the exhilarating anonymity of urban window-shopping melts away but so too, it seems, does the threat of breaking continuity with the past as she gives into the "seduc[tion of] the vision behind the glass" (Outka 2009, 148). Breathing in the flowery scent, Clarissa opens her eyes to see Mulberry's transformed into a vision of "frilled linen from a laundry" and "sweet peas spreading in their bowls," of "girls in muslin frocks [who] came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day" (*MD* 13)—to see, that is, the summer evening at Bourton thirty-four years earlier, when she and Sally (who "made [flowers] swim on the top of water in bowls") share "the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it" (35). Merging her present and past, Clarissa forgets the distress of self-reflection; and as she feels alone with Miss Pym, alone with Sally, "the others disappeared." But just as years ago Peter's sudden interruption of Clarissa and Sally's union intrudes "like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness," the sound of "a pistol shot in the street outside" draws Miss Pym away to the window. Clarissa again violently confronts the barriers that separate her from others. The backfiring car shatters both the feeling of union and the transparent overlay of Mulberry's and Bourton—just as the passage breaks, switching to the voice of an external, omniscient narrator.

At the window, Miss Pym shares what she sees with Clarissa; outside Mulberry's, the passersby who glimpse through the window of the car share their vision too, the rumors "passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud" (14). If a kind of recognition or mutuality—being seen and liked and trusted by Sally, by Miss Pym—in Mulberry's could facilitate the deep reverie it does for Clarissa, perhaps the collective gaze of the Bond Street crowd through the window of the motorcar might also offer a shared perception, returning us perhaps to the prewar model of glass mediation



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or, alternatively, Halbwachs's postwar notion that "one can say equally well either that the individual remembers by placing himself at the viewpoint of the group, or that the group memory realizes and manifests itself in the memories of individuals" (quoted in House 1925, 390). With not just one but three people actually seeing the figure through the car window, getting the very recently past vision to fill in the space broken by a "square of dove grey" (*MD* 14)—the blind drawn by the figure inside—might seem more likely. Nevertheless, while "for thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window," the effect is one of acute epistemological uncertainty: "Nobody knew whose face had been seen"—even those who saw it. Those who had seen and people who hadn't both claim to know for certain that the figure is indeed the prince of Wales, the queen, or the prime minister—a fragmentation of any collective vision and knowledge. As with their romantic relationship, the scene that might narratively unite Clarissa, on one side of it, with Peter, on the other, occasions not any successful union but a moment of communal, epistemological, and perceptual collapse.

The smooth, sliding surface of the present proves time and again to be a fleeting illusion, and if neither the one-sided solitary reflections of Clarissa and Peter nor the attempt at communal recognition of authority suffices to recover and maintain the depths of the past, Woolf does consider an alternative in Septimus. Here, getting the past to shadow the broken present involves a different kind of immersion and a kind of mutuality different from either that which Clarissa finds in Mulberry's or that which Armstrong deems characteristic of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, even as, in a society fractured by the experience of war, Woolf investigates the allure and impossibility of both a self-contained private consciousness and seamless collective understanding. If early twentieth-century sociology rejects "individual memory, as a purportedly original agency" in favor of "collective consciousness . . . whose ontological status is not in question," Woolf thus raises the question of what it means for someone like Septimus, returned from the war, to experience himself as part of "the group, not the isolated individual but the individual as a group member" (Ricoeur 2005, 95).

In other words, rather than see Clarissa's rise in terms of Septimus's fall, or suggest that Woolf "obviously . . . brought in Septimus not so much to state his own case as to enhance that of Clarissa," I'd like to consider instead how she interrogates the impossibility of someone like Peter or Clarissa conceiving of his or her life apart from a past populated by sacrifices *already made* by unknown young men like



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Septimus (Rachman 1972, 5). This may still be to illuminate something about Clarissa, but I'd like to suggest that Woolf very carefully maintains a separation, boundaries both as solid and transparent as a pane of glass, between the characters. Clarissa cannot contemplate the "peace" of her present apart from the realities of Septimus's past, nor can she appropriate or absorb his experiences as her own. Neither the Victorian vision of "individual experience tak[ing] a social form" (Armstrong 2008, 14) nor the modernist fascination with a single subject's capacity to experience "various levels of reference . . . and simultaneity" quite suffice (Giedion 1977, 489). The figure of Septimus demonstrates Woolf's constant negotiation of the pressing but extremely delicate relationship between the limits and possibilities of intersubjective and temporal experiences alike.

With the motorcar that pulls Miss Pym to the window and the narrative perspective away from Clarissa's, we suddenly catch our first glimpse of Septimus, "aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed" (*MD* 14). The novel begins with one scene of the seeming interpenetration of past and present, immediately disrupted by Scrope Purvis's externalized vision of Clarissa. And here, disrupting the melding of Bourton and London, we have another such intrusion, Clarissa's immersion in the past pointedly interrupted by the imagined sound of a gunshot and the vision of a similarly pale and birdlike war veteran. Abstracted momentarily to Woolf's omniscient third-person narrator, the street scene that follows "the surface agitation" (14) produced by the motorcar, comes back into focus through Septimus, who takes in the scene, looking at where "the motor-car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree" (14–15). Remarkably, his perception of the car window is the only stable one rendered in this scene. While Clarissa and the various members of the crowd let their guesses slide into conflicting certainties about the identity of the figure behind the glass, Septimus's gaze settles on the materiality of the glass window, the drawn blind behind it, and the pattern of trees on its surface—the vision of authority turned correctly (and quite literally) into the "shadow of shades" (Woolf 1989, 88) that the narrator in Woolf's earlier short story "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) only dreams about. His also is the only vision that is confirmed by another person, as his wife Rezia likewise notes "the tree pattern on the blinds" (*MD* 15). Though Rezia wonders whether the Queen is sitting in the car, she and Septimus are alone in seeing the window, blind, and pattern that are actually there, rather than falsely claiming to have perceived who or what is beyond them.



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The couple's accurate reading of the glass's complex surface quickly dissolves, however, into what Septimus sees as the "wavering and quivering" of the world—much like the wavering and quivering of the glassed present in "The Moment"—and the distraught understanding that he is "being looked at and pointed at . . . for a purpose." Insofar as we might see Septimus, in his own words, "descend[ing] another step into the pit" (90), as in the bifurcated vision of "A Sketch," his repeated reference to himself as a "drowned sailor" (67) and to Rezia likewise as "drowned, under water" (87) is telling. *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays the sliding surface of a stream, but to persist in the face of the surface's inevitable splintering, one must also somehow step *into* the stream of the past. And for most of *Mrs. Dalloway* it is pointedly through Septimus's immersion, *not* Clarissa's, that the wartime past shadows the broken surface of the present.

Retreating from Bond Street into a park, Rezia unsuccessfully attempts to hide herself and Septimus from others. While Clarissa might exult in her sense of anonymity on the streets of London, the Warren Smiths feel the unwanted attention of numerous passersby, like Peter, Maisie Johnson, Carrie Dempster, and, at least in Septimus's mind, Evans, his friend and officer who died in the war. As he sits under such scrutiny, "the word 'time' split its husk; poured its riches over [Septimus]" (69). The barriers separating moments of time, past from present, collapse, as Septimus's words mingle with "an immortal ode," and the voices of the war dead of Thessaly, led by the far more recently deceased Evans, join him in Regent's Park. The chiming clocks that interrupt Peter's gazing into the "glassy depths" and snag Clarissa's urban euphoria with an awareness of her impending death make no impression on Septimus, who seems both smilingly oblivious and uncannily linked to the present time they tell. When Rezia asks him, "What is the time?" Septimus, "smiling mysteriously" at Peter, whom he sees as Evans, announces that he "will tell [her] the time," just as "the quarter struck—the quarter to twelve." Where the visions of Clarissa and Peter at their respective glass panes are disrupted, Septimus merges the past and the present seamlessly—though he does so at a cost.

Septimus's equanimity at the end of this passage first masks the terror of Evans's arrival. While time splits its husk, the clear vision of the tree-patterned gray blind likewise breaks, as Evans—constantly figured as either "behind the tree" or "behind the screen"—emerges, "a man in grey," as "the branches parted." Where Clarissa's experience of the past is interrupted by broken surfaces, Evans presses on, heedless of Septimus's



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own cry, "For God's sake don't come!" This terror comes precisely from a momentary sensation of the past intruding upon the present without the distinction of things *having happened*: if Evans is indeed already dead and approaching him thus, Septimus "could not look upon [him]," but, as it is, "no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed" (68). Clarissa cannot feel the presence of the past without the present intruding, figured as her awareness of herself and the glass's mediation; Peter finds his momentary glimpse of the glassy depths so devastating that he turns promptly to the illusion of an eternally triumphant national future; on the other side of the broken present, Septimus's vision offers a fluid gateway to a past that won't stay put, a nightmare vision by which the present body of Peter is dissolved into that of the deceased Evans (in contrast to Clarissa's dreamy conflation of Sally and Miss Pym).

As Rezia repeatedly commands him to "look" at "real things" (25) around them in the park, the distance intensifies between Septimus's fluid temporal perception and the material world around him. In the ceaseless blurring of present object and past memory, Septimus experiences not only the melding of Peter and Evans but also the "horrible, terrible" sight of a dog becoming a man and "the flesh . . . melted off the world" (66). That he can "see through bodies" in one sense enacts Clarissa's vision of the interconnectedness of all things but also leads to a sense of "his [own] body . . . macerated until only the nerve fibres were left." Likewise, looking at the trees in the park becomes too much for Septimus, who wants desperately to "shut his eyes" and "see no more" because he can't help but see "the leaves . . . connected by millions of fibres with his own body" (22). Worn away to nothing but this sense of a painful dissolution of boundaries between himself and those around him, between the present and the past, Septimus feels his body "spread like a veil upon rock" (66). The prospect of drowning that pervades Woolf's earlier stories, like the narrator's underwater desire in "The Mark on the Wall" "to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts" (Woolf 1989, 87), emerges here as a fully realized nightmare. Rezia's directives to look are, after all, Dr. Holmes's.

Brought to Sir William Bradshaw's for a second medical opinion, Septimus sits "in the arm-chair under the skylight staring at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw" (MD 95), and there the trees that pattern both the car window and its Regent's Park echo are gone—as is Septimus's memory. Asked by Sir William about his "crime," which just pages earlier Septimus enumerates as various iterations of his inability to feel about the events



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of his past, he repeatedly "could not remember it. . . . Love, trees, there is no crime—what was his message? He could not remember it" (96). The sudden disruptiveness that plagues Clarissa and Peter's memories suddenly thwarts Septimus too—Septimus who is pathologically incapable of forgetting—here, on the other side of Mulberry's glass, and below Sir William Bradshaw's, almost a hundred pages later.

While Septimus's experience of the screened motorcar window and his re-envisioning of the screen in the park introduce his past as utterly occupying his present, looking through a clear glass frame at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw—a woman who once roamed rivers catching salmon but whose will has long since been "water-logged . . . sunk"—brings Septimus to the surface of the present: the "ground-glass skylight" (95) above and the photograph of a younger Lady Bradshaw before him. At such a moment of looking at "a world which has gone beneath the waves" years ago, Woolf writes in "The Cinema," the brain is roused from the stupor of the eye (2008, 173). Only here, under the ground-down glass skylight of Sir William's roof, Septimus and Lady Bradshaw are both part of a submerged world, part of a necessarily suppressed past (hers, her youth; his, the war)—*not* floating along the plate-glass surfaces of present city streets. The revelation of the glassed partitions between him and Lady Bradshaw, between him and this moment of June outside, brings Septimus not further down into the indistinguishable depths of the past but fully up to the material surfaces of the present. The encounter with Sir Bradshaw leaves Septimus "muttering messages about beauty"; "But beauty," as Septimus notes soon thereafter, "was behind a pane of glass" (MD 96).

Back in their Bloomsbury flat later that afternoon, Rezia delights in Septimus's momentary return to the present. They joke and chat and make a hat; Septimus wakes from a nap to find himself "stretched out . . . not on a hill-top; not on a crag; on Mrs. Filmer's sitting-room sofa" (142). The "visions, the faces, the voices of the dead" (143) are gone, and Evans no longer responds from behind the screen. A plate of bananas, an embroidered screen, and the coal scuttle remain a plate of bananas, an embroidered screen, and the coal scuttle: *anti*-memory objects that—rather than connecting him, fiber by fiber, as with Peter and the dog in Regent's Park, to the terrors of the past—ground Septimus in the present. Ready at last to "face the screen" and accept his separation from his past, however, he realizes that in doing this he will be subject instead to the men "who different in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another),



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yet judges . . . were" (145). Reminiscent of that morning's crowd on Bond Street and its failed seeing—and invested with power and "ten thousand a year"—Bradshaw and Holmes "mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted."

Unnervingly at his most lucid, Septimus opens the lodging-house window and "throw[s] himself out," rejecting the kinds of social submission that Bradshaw and Holmes seek to impose (hiding away in a sanatorium or hiding in plain sight by pretending everything is fine). Septimus's death, his flinging his body through the opened window to land on the rails dividing Mrs. Filmer's private property from the public street beyond, seems a clear reaction against—and product of—a postwar culture that might still claim individual experience could peacefully take social form or, alternatively, looks to valorize the seamless multiplicity of one individual's experience alone. And the role of windows in his suicide invites us to consider the question of what Septimus's death might mean for Peter, Clarissa, and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Peter's turn from the street window to the false future, to boys too young to have fought in the war marching toward an empty tomb; his failure to see Septimus, a real, live soldier, as anything but one half of a generic lovers' quarrel in the park; and, again, his perverse proclamation that the ambulance speeding Septimus's body away is indicative of "one of the triumphs of civilization" (166)—in short, Peter's repeated insistence upon surfaces without depth, present perceptions disjoined from the actual past—meet with Clarissa's thwarted attempts to identify herself and her past with Septimus. She hears about his suicide at her party, and "her body went through it, when she was told" (202). In sharp contrast to the opening pages of the novel, where Clarissa's thoughts of the present and the past come together along a string of fluid, explanatory "for"s, the prevailing conjunction of the pages that address her physical and biographical identification with Septimus is the resistant "but": "A young man had killed himself—but how? . . . So she saw it. But why had he done it? . . . She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. . . . But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? . . . She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself" (202–3). One could read these comparisons as an indication of the various ways in which Mrs. Dalloway's bourgeois existence is buoyed by the sacrifices of young men like him. Certainly, the lines that follow the quotation above seem at first glance to confirm that reading: "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in



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this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success, Lady Bexborough and the rest of it. And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton" (203). But Clarissa's punishment of seeing others "sink and disappear" while ostensibly seeing herself reflected both "in her evening dress" and in all her vanity, wanting to be seen and admired, also recalls her earlier reckoning on Bond Street—a shifted trajectory confirmed by the otherwise somewhat out-of-place sentence, "And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton."

Tellingly, Clarissa's contemplation of Septimus's suicide stages this tension explicitly at a window. Just as she leaves her house in the morning convinced that no one sees or recognizes her, Clarissa had imagined that her peering through their windows into the life of the old lady opposite was likewise seamless, unidirectional, unremarked. But the abrupt realization that the old lady may have seen her all along, punctuated by two exclamations ("Oh but how surprising!—in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her!"), emerges alongside another doubled exclamation about the light across the way, behind drawn blinds, shining and then going out ("There! The old lady had put out her light!") (181). In between these two revelations, Clarissa hears the clock strike the hour and thinks of how "the young man had killed himself." The violent extinguishing of Septimus's life, quietly doubled in the old lady's light going out—or in seeing "sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness"—"made [Clarissa] feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" of her life, considered in relation to such precarity; it also, however, makes her feel that "she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter" (182). As Clarissa finally glimpses both the possibilities and limitations of her window-watching, of her ability to imagine a soldier's life and death, we encounter one last narrative transition to the outside: in the remaining seven pages of the novel she is almost entirely absent, the fullest and most continuous account of her past offered through Sally and Peter's shared memories from the other side of the house.

In the aftermath of Septimus's death, Peter similarly warns himself against "a sort of lust over the visual impression . . . fatal to art, fatal to friendship" and remembers how Clarissa "felt herself everywhere . . . since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spread wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered, somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps"



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(148–49). We might locate the work of glass in this novel in that dash, the slender line coordinating two sides, the seen and unseen, this person and that, the present and the past—the difference wrought by repetition. Through Woolf’s play on and through the ubiquitous glass surfaces of interwar London, we encounter the innovative possibilities of accounting for the past through the interplay of multiple persons and their shared perceptions; we also confront the very real boundaries that limit and obscure these same visions. These boundaries, figured both materially and metaphorically through glass, constitute the necessary separation of moments in time, past from present, and of individual lives (Clarissa, Peter, Septimus) even as their permeability allows a sense of interconnectedness, of beauty and terror.

From the uninterrupted movement between “gazer, then the glass, then the space and the objects behind it” that allows us “to recognize . . . the loop of idealization and desire” in her earlier wartime writing, to the various confrontations of thwarted, if tantalizing, access to one’s own past, or another’s, staged through that same glass several years later in *Mrs. Dalloway* and “A Sketch of the Past,” we see the evolution of Woolf’s interrogation of what it looks like to remember in a newly “transparent”—and newly violent—modern world (Outka 2009, 137). In the interwar texts, however, the brokenness of such rememberings is figured by perception, not by glass itself. Although glass may be covered by blinds, ground into opaque skylights, or moved aside for suicides, it remains *intact*. While plate glass’s synthetic sister cellophane could boast not only of “pure transparency” but also of durability, glass remains brittle, subject to cracking or shattering, and it would suggest that its relative fragility (with its architectural ubiquity) points to Woolf’s anticipation of the violence to come.

David Trotter argues that Woolf, like other modernist writers, perhaps “found in the brittleness of glass a metaphor more appropriate to their purposes than they did in its transparency” (2011, 53). But where for Trotter modernist representations of glass nonetheless suggest utopian possibilities,<sup>11</sup> I read Woolf’s growing sense of glass’s contingency under the alternative anticipatory signs of another World War, not utopia. The glass in Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” might hold together long enough for her to shadow its broken surface, but there’s a tenuousness that is markedly absent from earlier invocations of the material. And with the onset of the Second World War, glass becomes synonymous not with transparency but with brokenness.<sup>12</sup>



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The scattered “hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors” that seem to stop the “hands of the clock . . . at the present moment” in *Between the Acts* emerge then as particularly charged fragments (Woolf 1941, 185–86). In *Mrs. Dalloway*'s world, while Big Ben and St. Margaret's might chime at discordant intervals, the clock time they each mark still moves on. Even Septimus's most terrifying experiences of time's disintegration still coincide with the chiming of the three-quarter hour. But in *Between the Acts*, the moment that the audience of Miss La Trobe's play reckons with the fragmented glass around it—when they can see no depths but only themselves reflected—marks the cessation both of clock time (“the hands of the clock had stopped”) and of experiential time (“It *was* now”) (186, emphasis mine). In other words, Woolf's final novel momentarily heralds the ultimate nightmare vision: no reckoning with the past or future beyond the present; nothing behind the glass; no regaining the “peace” in which one might “feel the present sliding over the depths of the past” or further “writing . . . to shadow the broken surface with the past” (Woolf 1985, 98). Only war. If the collective visions of Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus coalesce around their attempts to navigate the (in)separability of their pasts from the present via glass, in Woolf's later accounts the onslaught of the past cannot be resisted, marking the return of world war and the very sacrifices that made the June day of *Mrs. Dalloway* possible.

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Irene Yoon is a doctoral student in the department of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Her writing on postwar popular culture has appeared in *Transition* magazine. Her research interests include transatlantic modernism and twentieth-century visual culture.

## Notes

1. See, for example, B. Brown 1999, Trotter 2011, and Elkins 2013.
2. See also Harvena Richter's discussion of glass “surface[s] or background[s] as a reflector of the self” (1978, 99).
3. We might overlook glass in favor of the subjects and objects it frames, but the very possibility of overlooking glass still requires our insistent looking at and through it. Noting several key moments in Woolf's novels where different characters look at the same thing, either at the same time or, as is crucially the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*, at a temporal and geographical remove, Douglas



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Mao makes the compelling case for how these scenes reflect her signature negotiation of “time or space . . . as well as intersubjective distance” (1998, 54). Notably, every example Mao provides (Rachel and Evelyn looking at framed photographs in *The Voyage Out*; Katherine and Ralph seeing fields through a train window in *Night and Day*; Clarissa and Septimus glimpsing *Cymbeline* through Hatchard’s window; Clarissa meeting the gaze of the old lady opposite through their windows) occurs through the unremarked mediation of glass. I propose we shift our perspective to consider the glass that she consistently invokes to frame and mediate them all.

4. “Aerodynamic tears” refers to the “teardrop” curvature popularized by industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes as the ideal shape to reduce drag and maximize speed on airplanes.

5. For an excellent account of how Woolf deviates from the Bergsonian model, see Banfield 2003.

6. In this way, Woolf’s engagement with glass presages work like Anne Cheng’s (2010) and Judith Brown’s (2008) that draws our attention to an interwar moment that complicated the very possibility of a “pure” surface, even as it extolled its virtues.

7. *Mrs. Dalloway* will be cited as *MD*.

8. Accordingly, Mitchell goes on to describe windows in particular as “perhaps one of the most important inventions in the history of visual culture, opening architecture to new relations of inner and outer, and remapping the human body by analogy into inner and outer spaces” (2004, 214).

9. The frozen Thames in Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) is a clear example of her use of icy surfaces to interrogate models of time. But in it there’s no separation between the surface and the deep—the water is frozen through, the world of the past perfectly preserved, still and visible.

10. For further discussion of the construction of female identity and the urban spectator as *flâneuse* vis-à-vis changes in glass display and consumer culture, see Bowlby 1985, Friedberg 1994, and Weinbaum 2003.

11. Reading the metaphor of shattering glass by which the narrator of *Jacob’s Room* represents Jacob and his friends as they assemble and disperse in the wake of an argument, Trotter insists that “to imagine them as breakable is not necessarily to imagine them broken” (2011, 58). Through the figure of glass, he writes, we might “imagine them as not needing to be unbreakable in order to remain what they are”—even shattered and dispersed, the possibility of individual identification remains. Though he concedes that “there is little



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utopia in that expectation—soon to be eclipsed by Jacob's death in the war," he finds further possibilities emerging in the material changes glass manufacturing would begin to bring about in the mid-1920s, making glass more flexible than previously imaginable.

12. See Elkins 2013.

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# Baldwin's Hemingway: *The Sun Also Rises* in *Giovanni's Room*, with a Twist

Jessica Kent

I n the wake of a world war, an American-born author moved to Paris to join a flourishing literary community and five years later published a novel about a community of expatriates living in Paris and traveling in Spain. The narrator-protagonist is an American man suffering from sexual issues; after excessive drinking in cafes and some painful romantic encounters, he attempts to accept his life as it is. This is a description both of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and, as I hope to show, pairing the texts helps illuminate the latter text's ambivalent but revealing relationship with the former.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of that relationship is how *Giovanni's Room* amplifies a central concern of *The Sun Also Rises*: the cultural compulsion to pursue an American ideal—white, straight, potent, and self-possessed—that is both impossible to ignore and impossible to meet.

Connecting Baldwin to Hemingway might well seem like an unlikely move. In one account of his own influences, Baldwin insists, "My models—my private models—are not Hemingway, not Faulkner, not Dos Passos, or indeed any American writer. I model myself on jazz musicians, dancers, a couple of whores and a few junkies" (quoted in Pratt 1978, 17–18). And biographical differences make this an unlikely critical pairing anyway. As D. Quentin Miller remarks, "Baldwin and Hemingway had markedly differing life stories: one black, urban, poor, and overtly bisexual, the other white, most comfortable in rural settings, relatively well off, and overtly heterosexual" (2012, 120). More broadly, Gary Edward Holcomb and Charles Scruggs (2012) argue that claiming Hemingway as a major influence for African American writers clashes with much of contemporary African American literary studies. In "Hemingway and the Black Renaissance," building on arguments by Houston Baker (1987)



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and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988), they consider whether “black literary modernism developed independently from a majority modernism (or modernisms)” (Holcomb and Scruggs 2012, 6–7) and “black literary arts issue from an ancestry different from that of western, textually oriented writing” (7). In this view, the African American literary tradition operates primarily through a closed system of call and response.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, in the 1930s and 1940s it would have been very difficult not to have been influenced by Hemingway; “He, even more than Faulkner and Fitzgerald,” Scruggs writes, “was considered the greatest living writer of prose fiction” (2012, 55). Hemingway’s influence on Baldwin in particular is apparent, as in some of Baldwin’s titles (such as *Another Country* and “The New Lost Generation”) and at the end of “Autobiographical Notes”: “I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done” (Baldwin [1955] 1984, 9). Indeed, in a statement to his agent Baldwin explicitly connects the two novels: “There was also something in [*Giovanni’s Room*] of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* though his own generation wasn’t even so well defined as to be considered ‘lost,’ and he also wanted his texture more dense, his pain more awful, his resolution less despairing” (quoted in Weatherby 1989, 122). Baldwin was particularly drawn to his predecessor’s view of pain. In a 1962 essay, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” Baldwin suggests that the greatness of previous American writers lies in “the American way of looking on the world, as a place to be corrected, and in which innocence is inexplicably lost,” a condition that causes the “almost inexpressible pain which lends such force to some of the early Hemingway stories—including ‘The Killers’ and to the marvelous fishing sequence in *The Sun Also Rises*” (2010, 30). So detached from the African American literary tradition, Hemingway thus nevertheless loomed large in Baldwin’s literary landscape, because of the particularly American manner in which his work represents the agony of believing that the world can somehow “be corrected” through a force of will. *Giovanni’s Room* explores the folly of this faith by animating it to an extreme degree.

Building on the work of Baker and Gates, African American literary scholarship has begun to trace Hemingway’s impact on black writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay, Baldwin, and others, offering a terminology to describe the complexities of cross-racial literary influence. Ed Pavlić (2000), for example, traces Baldwin’s relationship



to another inescapable white literary predecessor. Building especially on Gates's argument in *The Signifying Monkey*, Pavlić argues that while Gates's term "unmotivated Signifying" is often used to describe respectful repetitions within the African American literary tradition, "motivated Signifying" often denotes an "oppositional and parodic" mode of cross-racial repetitions (2000, 516).<sup>3</sup> Pavlić offers "syndetic homage" as a third mode allowing for "cross-racial resonances which do not deny racial dissonance but move beyond 'profound difference' and generate at least the beginning of a call and response discussion in the place where racial and cultural traditions meet" (517). For Hemingway and Baldwin, racial and cultural traditions meet around questions of gender identification and sexual orientation.

It is easy to imagine Hemingway inspiring motivated Signification. *The Sun Also Rises* presents reductive images of blackness, like the drummer at Zelli's whom Jake describes as "all teeth and lips" (Hemingway 1926 [2006], 69)<sup>4</sup> and whose singing and shouting Hemingway suppresses with ellipses. In the next scene, Bill Gorton describes a Vienna prize fight in which an "awful noble looking nigger" (77) defeated a white boy, inciting race violence. Though the victor is a dignified character, Bill's storytelling abstracts him into a racial signifier by using the word "nigger" sixteen times in the space of one page. It would come as little surprise if texts in the African American literary tradition reacted with oppositional parody. Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark* that Hemingway is useful to her project because of how absolutely removed he and his texts are from the African American experience or literary tradition; he "has no need, desire, or awareness of them either as readers of his work or as people existing anywhere other than in his imaginative (and imaginatively lived) world" (1992, 69). And yet, *Giovanni's Room*, with its utter absence of blackness, might appear to outdo Hemingway's detachment. Michel Fabre suggests Baldwin's expatriation to Paris allowed him to differentiate between his identity as a black man and as an American, and that in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin separates these parts of himself into two characters, for "it is easy to translate Giovanni's image into a symbol of the Negro, thus making of David the puritan face of Baldwin himself as an American" (1991, 205). For Jean Méral, "James Baldwin chooses to make all his characters white, in order to remove any possible racial interference" (1989, 223) with the story's treatment of homosexuality. But even in Baldwin's all-white Paris, it will not prove quite that simple to separate race from sexuality.



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The representation of homosexuality in *The Sun Also Rises* might well also inspire motivated Signification. J. Gerald Kennedy notes a number of excised passages expressing Jake's "virulent aversion" (1993, 101) to homosexual men and suggests that, while "omitting this jeering, Hemingway [only] partially masked his prejudices," and that "traces of his angry fascination with homosexuality nevertheless remain," most notably in the *bal musette* scene (102).<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, Baldwin's response is far from straightforward parody or correction. Indeed, Hemingway's messy sexuality speaks to Baldwin's interest in characters whose bodies, hearts, and minds struggle to realize contradictory desires.<sup>6</sup> Baldwin characterizes his own protagonist's complex relationship to normalized definitions of masculinity through a call and response with Hemingway's text,<sup>7</sup> though this is an homage with a twist. This paper, then, will trace a concern central to both novels, as their characters struggle to achieve an idealized—and impossible—American norm. Suggestively, the degree of each character's suffering depends on how closely he can approximate the norm and on the depth of his faith in American self-determination.

One of the obsessions of *Giovanni's Room* is the great force of compulsory heterosexuality, which the novel closely links to gender identification. If he does not comply with the code by which one must love women to be a man, David fears he will become a sexual exile like *les folles*, men whom neither men nor women want. He thinks, "I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted the same bed at night and the same arms and I wanted to rise in the morning, knowing where I was" (Baldwin 1956, 104).<sup>8</sup> For David's fiancée Hella, too, gender identity depends on a performance of heterosexuality, as when, after their engagement, she says with relief, "From now on, I can have a wonderful time complaining about being a woman. But I won't be terrified that I'm not one" (126). In the face of such powerful sexual norms David's attempt at heterosexuality crumbles into tragedy, and the heterosexual compulsion emerges in the novel as both irresistible and untenable.

Whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality intersect in medical and pedagogical discourses in the first half of the twentieth century, which—purporting to reflect neutral data but in fact concerning only white, straight, married couples—consolidated a definition of normal American sexuality. With its race-evasive language, the discourse of normality in this



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period, Julian Carter argues, defined "self-alignment with white racial ideals . . . as the basic requirement for participation in American life" (2007, 78). Both white and non-white, straight and queer Americans were subject to this definition of the normal. In the early decades of the twentieth century, fears about white reproductive weakness were displaced onto fears about homosexuality, coded as primitive and degenerate, but the power of the normal was rooted in its occlusion of racial and sexual politics.<sup>9</sup>

The extreme force of this compulsory normality takes shape in *Giovanni's Room* through far-reaching structural borrowing, and we can see this force by overlaying the erotic love triangle of that novel onto the triangle at the center of *The Sun Also Rises*.<sup>10</sup> The central love triangle in *Giovanni's Room* is bisexual and looks like this:

Hella	Giovanni
	David

As Eve Sedgwick argues, in "Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles" (1997), changing the placement of particular members of the pattern doesn't change its dynamic, so, for the sake of argument, let's twist the triangle one click counterclockwise to create the heterosexual rivalry with which David would feel more comfortable:

Giovanni	David
	Hella

In this theoretical heterosexual triangle, David could experience his bond with Giovanni in a socially sanctioned way while competing for a lady love. Interestingly, in early versions of *Giovanni's Room* the central love affair was indeed heterosexual.<sup>11</sup> This pattern of desire does not operate in the finished novel, however, in which David's feelings for Hella are in question throughout, and Giovanni's feeling for his romantic rival is only resentment.

Hemingway's love triangle, though heterosexual, is complex for a different reason. Although Jake and Brett's mutual attraction remains constant, Jake's heterosexual sexual failure may provide a model for David's, and Brett's struggle between stability and freedom may provide a model for Hella's. The third corner, however, is occupied by a series of men—Mike Campbell, Pedro Romero, Robert Cohn, and Count



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Mippipopolous—and Baldwin's Giovanni resembles these men in various ways: his desire for David echoes Bill's homosocial affection for Jake; like Romero he is beautiful and passionately desiring; like Cohn his public vulnerability emasculates him. The striking similarities between the corresponding corners of the two triangles illuminate the fact that Baldwin's novel is pulling toward heterosexuality on a much larger scale than that of David's personal struggle. Each pair showcases their similarities through parallel androgyny or lapses of heterosexual functionality, but these parallels would not be possible if we did not first acknowledge on a broader scale, through the twist of the triangle, how powerfully the characters in *Giovanni's Room* desire heterosexuality. Here is the Hemingway triangle next to the one we have posited:

Giovanni	David	Cohn	Jake
	Hella		Brett

The parallel between Cohn and Giovanni is particularly important because they are the only members of the protagonists' expatriate circle of friends who are coded racially other. As a Jew, Cohn suffers discrimination at the hands of his classmates at Princeton and his expatriate friends, and though Jake himself is not quite as publicly and virulently anti-Semitic as Mike or Bill, he still identifies with the Anglo-Christian perspective and sees Cohn as an outsider. A dark-complexioned Italian, Giovanni is also coded racially other, in notable opposition to David, who in the opening image of *Giovanni's Room* regards his pale reflection and observes, "My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. . . . My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (GR 3). When David first describes Giovanni he notes his darkness and compares him to an African animal—"[The new barman] stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register"—and he immediately thinks of slavery: "I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was, in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on the auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques" (28). David here conflates Giovanni's Italian darkness with the blackness of slaves but believes this difference brings with it power. In this imagined transaction, Giovanni is somehow both the seller and the sold.



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Just as Cohn and Giovanni are racially coded as other, Jake and David both see their emotionality as an unmasculine weakness. Unable to accept that their tryst meant nothing to Brett, in a fit of jealous rage Cohn beats up his romantic rivals, and afterward Jake tells us, "Cohn was crying. There he was, face down on the bed, crying. . . . He was crying. His voice was funny. He lay there in his white shirt on the bed in the dark. . . . He was crying without making any noise" (SAR 197-98). And his girlfriend Frances mockingly advises him, "Don't have scenes with your young ladies. Try not to. Because you can't have scenes without crying" (57). To Jake, such emotionality negates Cohn's more traditionally masculine talents. Likewise, Giovanni also believes in romantic love and he is most intensely emotional, like Cohn, at the end of his love affair. When David returns to Giovanni's room for the last time, Giovanni starts to cry: "His eyes were red and wet, but he wore a strange smile, it was composed of cruelty and shame and delight" (GR 136). Giovanni considers his emotions a strength and criticizes David's inability to love: "'You do not . . . love anyone! You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! . . .' He grasped me by the collar, wrestling and caressing at once, fluid and iron at once, saliva spraying from his lips and his eyes full of tears, but with the bones of his face showing and the muscles leaping in his arms and neck" (141). Although he recognizes its passion, David is disgusted by the physicality of Giovanni's weeping. The first time David sees Giovanni cry is the day Guillaume fires him: "He began to cry. I held him. And, while I felt his anguish entering into me, like acid in his sweat, and felt that my heart would burst for him, I also wondered, with an unwilling, unbelieving contempt, why I had ever thought him strong" (106).

Brett and Hella are both Anglo expatriates living in Paris, and though both are engaged to be married, as they travel to Spain they both experience romantic indecision. Physically, both have a somewhat boyish appearance. Though Brett has a feminine shape, she styles herself androgynously, with a boy's haircut, a masculine jersey sweater, and often a man's felt hat (SAR 30). Similarly, when David sees Hella in the train station, he observes that "her hair was a little shorter, and her face was tan, and she wore the same brilliant smile. . . . She stood stock-still on the platform, her hands clasped in front of her, with her wide-legged, boyish stance, smiling" (GR 119). Readers' first impressions of both women are shaped by masculine markers of confidence.



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As they enter the plot, Hella is in a social position similar to Brett's, though they develop in different ways. Mark Spilka describes Brett as "the freewheeling equal of any man" who exists in a "moral and emotional vacuum among her postwar lovers" (2002, 36), while Wendy Martin, more sympathetically, suggests that, "On the one hand, [Brett] is insouciant, careless, a femme fatale—a woman dangerous to men; on the other, she reflexively lapses into the role of redemptive woman by trying to save men through her sexuality" (2002, 50–51). Either way, Brett is notable partly for her seeming fearlessness, comfort in public spaces, and sexual activity. While what is most notable in Hella is her desire to nest, she appears very much like Brett when David recounts how they met: "I can see her, very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by the light which fills the salon of the ocean liner, drinking rather too fast, and laughing, and watching the men. That was how I met her, in a bar in Saint-Germain-des-Pres, she was drinking and watching, and that was why I liked her, I thought she would be fun to have fun with" (GR 4). Hella is here in search of her next fling: like Brett, seemingly "insouciant, careless, a femme fatale."

Late in the novels both women imagine the prospect of feminizing their masculine styles in order to keep a man, and here we can see how the normalizing pressures are more intense in *Giovanni's Room*. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett explains that Pedro Romero wanted to marry her after she had gotten more "womanly": "He wanted me to grow my hair out. Me, with long hair. I'd look so like hell" (SAR 246). For her, feminizing for the sake of a man is finally not an option; she ends the affair. But Hella embraces that option, imagining it would secure her identity as an appropriate wife. She pleads, "David, please let me be a woman. . . . I'll wear my hair long, I'll give up cigarettes, I'll throw away the books. . . . Just let me be a woman, take me. It's what I want. It's all I want. I don't care about anything else" (GR 161). David's suffering is not the result only of his non-normative sexuality, for even the straight Hella reacts with self-loathing anxiety to the overwhelming pressure she feels to enact a heterosexual gender identity.

Comparing the two protagonists suggests at first that Jake finally comes to some terms with his sexual difficulty in a way that David does not, though his relative peace of mind at least partly reflects his different position in relation to American gender norms. Where Jake is secure in his identity, David is fractured; Jake reaches a melancholy acceptance while David violently resists. We can see this, for example, in parallel scenes



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involving the observation of a policeman directing traffic. Hemingway's most famous policeman appears in the closing lines of *The Sun Also Rises*, as Jake and Brett ride in a cab through Madrid:

"Oh Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a good time together."

Ahead there was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (SAR 251)

In *Giovanni's Room*, the policeman appears just after David has picked up Hella at the train station upon her return from Spain: "Hella looked about delightedly at all of it, the cafes, the self-contained people, the violent snarl of traffic, the blue-caped policeman and his white, gleaming club. 'Coming back to Paris,' she said, after a moment, 'is always so lovely, no matter where you've been.' We got into a cab and our driver made a wide, reckless circle into the stream of traffic" (GR 120). In both scenes, the policeman appears to the protagonist and the woman with whom he has a vexed sexual relationship. Jake and Brett have reached, if not an ending, an understanding that they are in a destructive cycle they cannot change, while David and Hella are at the naive beginning of their relationship, with the wounding yet to begin. In both, the policeman serves as a reminder of virile masculinity, though Jake's description is direct, while David's is mediated through Hella's imagined perspective, marking David's alienation from his own experience, and highlighting the contrast between Hella's delight and David's anxiety. Jake stresses the phallic significance of the image, focusing on the blunt phrase "he raised his baton," an action mirroring the erection Jake cannot have but also directly causing physical contact with the woman he cannot have. He thus responds to Brett's comment with melancholic irony and with resignation. Unconcerned about his sexual potency, David doesn't comment about any "raising" of the baton, stressing instead the policeman's "white, gleaming club," a signifier of potent white masculinity. Instead, his great struggle is against his homosexual desire, and so he describes the "violent snarl" and "reckless" movement of a threatening cityscape that might out him at any moment.

Jake and David also study their bodies in two parallel mirror scenes, in which, undressing for bed, each sees his naked reflection. In *The Sun*



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*Also Rises*, Jake looks, but his attention wanders from his own reflection: "Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed. That was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, too, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny. I put on my pajamas and got into bed" (SAR 38). Jake first approaches the problem as if he is unafraid, with the assertive phrase "I looked at myself in the mirror." Unable to process what he sees there, he then turns his attention to the armoire, but he cannot remain distracted from his body for long: "Of all the ways to be wounded." The mirror provides a full frontal view of the problem, and whether Jake looks or turns away, the troubling image remains.

In *Giovanni's Room*, David, too, studies his naked reflection in the mirror:

The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under the sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries towards revelation.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

I long to make this prophesy come true. I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh. . . .

I move at last from the mirror and begin to cover the nakedness which I must hold sacred, though it be never so vile, which must be scoured perpetually with the salt of my life. I must believe, I must believe, that the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it.

(GR 167-69)

Like Jake, David muses on his relationship to heterosexuality, but he focuses on his genitalia in a way Jake cannot, compelled by a use-it-(heterosexually)-or-lose-it fear: "I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife." The



knife David fears is wielded by a holy hand seeking retribution for his "sin" of homosexuality. As if in response, he quotes from 1 Corinthians 13, a passage that, out of its biblical context, appears autobiographical. In its original context, the passage is part of a lesson on charity that glorifies selflessness in stark contrast to narcissistic mirror-gazing. Similarly, David's thoughts pull in two directions: first he suggests it is time to take his fate into his own hands but then calls on "the heavy grace of God" to carry him passively out of temptation. And the mirror's doubling recreates the split he feels throughout the novel, evident in his hope that the mind can make independent decisions and force them on the body. By the time we reach this scene, however, we know out-of-body decisions are impossible for David, as becomes clear in his first sexual encounter with Giovanni: "I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door. . . . With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes*" (64). David experiences his resistant mind as entirely at odds with his eager body, and the body wins the day, even if in the mirror scene he still "long[s] to crack the mirror and be free."

Both mirror scenes, then, represent the protagonist's struggle with what he feels is insufficient masculinity. Jake may appear more melancholy and resigned, and David more alienated and struggling, but for both the wishes of the mind are no match for the power of the body: David's desires are as ineradicable as Jake's wound. Suffering the split between body and mind, Jake thus appears a fitting antecedent for David, and though David's battle with compulsory heterosexuality involves more self-loathing, Jake's relative resignation does not make him a model of stoic acceptance to which David fails to rise. Jake begs Brett to live with him, a conversation they seem to have rehearsed many times before, and for all his valuing of self-control, Jake cannot help crying himself to sleep over Brett or feeling almost violently threatened by the gay men at the *bal musette*—cannot stop wanting the sex with Brett he associates with domestic bliss. In both novels, then, compulsory marital heterosexuality holds sway.<sup>12</sup>

For a variety of reasons, Jake and David experience the pressure of this compulsory norm quite differently. Jake's male friends offer him examples of the (apparently) fully realized heterosexual masculinity he desires. But in Mike Campbell, Robert Cohn, and Bill Gorton, Jake can see that sexual potency isn't a cure-all: none, it seems, experience fulfilling



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romantic relationships, much less fulfilling marriages. In contrast, in his expatriate community David's friends and acquaintances, from Guillaume to Jacques to Giovanni, are homosexual or bisexual. The only straight male character (besides unnamed and infantilized French husbands) is David's father, whom David escapes as soon as he can. Without lived examples of heterosexuality around him in Paris, David can continue to idealize the myth of the normal masculine man and punish himself for failing to fulfill it.

Jake also finds it easier than David to pass as successfully heterosexual. When Count Mippipopolous asks Jake and Brett why they don't marry, for example, the couple's quick, stock answers suggest a practiced response to that potentially awkward question. Jake's outward appearance as a sexually active heterosexual man also helps him pass as one. David's failure to pass shows most strikingly when a sailor in the street gives him a look of "instantaneous contempt," prompted, David knows, by the hunger in his gaze: "I was too old to suppose that it had anything to do with my walk, or the way I held my hands, or my voice. . . . I know that what the sailor had seen in my unguarded eyes was envy and desire" (GR 92). Here, as elsewhere, David's body betrays his desire, in spite of his attempt at control. While both men fail to meet the standard of procreative heterosexuality, because Jake's desires are heterosexual, because he sees the unhappiness of men who possess what he lacks, and because he can pass as a functioning straight man, it seems that Jake can accept the inevitability of his situation with more grace than can the fractured David.

Torn between his body and his mind, David also suffers more intensely because he believes he has the power to choose whom to love, and perhaps the most telling contrast between these characters lies in their very different understandings of the American myth of self-determination: the belief one can choose one's fate. In *The Sun Also Rises*, on the fishing trip to Burguette, Bill says to Jake, "I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn't tell you that in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot" (121), suggesting that identity categories are fuzzier in Europe than in America, where the problem of clear-cut categories introduces the obligation of choosing among them. Jake, as a "more or less permanent resident" of Paris, does not believe he has the power to choose who he will be, advising Cohn that a change in setting doesn't change the self: "Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn't make any difference. I've tried all that. You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another" (19). In *Giovanni's Room*, in contrast, David is plagued by choice, and on the night he and Giovanni meet it is choice they discuss:



"Time is just common, it's like water for fish. . . . The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn't care."

"Oh please," I said. "I don't believe *that*. Time's not water and we're not fish and you can choose to be eaten also not to eat—not to eat," I added quickly, turning a little red before his delighted and sardonic smile, "the little fish, of course."

"To choose!" cried Giovanni, turning his face away from me and speaking, it appeared, to an invisible ally who had been eavesdropping on this conversation all along. "To *choose*!" He turned to me again. "Ah, you are really an American. *J'adore votre enthousiasme!*" (GR 34–35)

Where Giovanni sees choice as an American myth and a defining characteristic of the true American, David believes he can choose between heterosexuality and homosexuality, Giovanni and Hella, being American and being European, being a tourist and being a native—a belief finally at the root of his suffering.

At its end *Giovanni's Room* raises the possibility that David might be coming to the point, like Jake, of resignation and acceptance. At the beginning of David's relationship with Giovanni, Jacques tells him, "You are lucky that what is happening to you now is happening now and not when you are forty or something like that, when there would be no hope for you and you would simply be destroyed" (54). Jacques knows that David's choice is already made, and all he can decide now is how to handle it. David plays dumb, insisting that he does not need to tell Hella about Giovanni because there is nothing to tell. Here and throughout the novel, David attempts to keep his options open, but by the end, it seems his belief in self-determination has been tempered by an awareness of Fate, and he can see his future: "Sometimes, in the days which are coming—God grant me the grace to live them—in the glare of the grey morning, sour-mouthed, eyelids raw and red, hair tangled and damp from my stormy sleep, facing, over coffee and cigarette smoke, last night's impenetrable, meaningless boy, who will shortly rise and vanish like the smoke, I will see Giovanni again, as he was that night" (42–43). If this suggests that David now accepts that he cannot opt out of his homosexuality, even at the end this acceptance only goes so far. Earlier in the novel, David felt he had a choice: he could have taken Jacques's advice and tried to love Giovanni while he had the chance. At the end, examining himself in the mirror, he still dreams he can become a man and give up childish things, once again imagining he has the power to choose



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his destiny. The novel closes, however, by ironizing that possibility: "The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (169). David tries to throw the memory of Giovanni—and homosexuality—to the wind, but the final sentence blows some of those fragments back onto his body.

In both novels, characters grapple with the same impossible American expectations, but perhaps Baldwin could empathize more deeply than Hemingway with that struggle. White, married, and a father, when he wrote *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway seemed to embody an ideal normality, at least in some obvious ways. Black, bisexual, unmarried, and childless, Baldwin had no recourse to these normalizing categories.<sup>13</sup> *Giovanni's Room* helps keep the focus on struggles involving sexuality, but perhaps it also suggests the sheer power of the normalizing ideals. The whiteness of Baldwin's characters, for example, makes conspicuous the absence of blackness. Though Baldwin may have felt ambivalent about the influence of his straight, white predecessor, *The Sun Also Rises* throws forward a melancholy possibility to the later text: Jake's resignation suggests the possibility of a self-acceptance constituting a small act of resistance to social compulsion.<sup>14</sup> Finally, *Giovanni's Room's* deep engagement with *The Sun Also Rises* doesn't resolve that ambiguity. Just as David struggles beneath the weight of compulsory heterosexuality, Baldwin struggles with the powerful influence of his predecessor. However, while David fails to harness the creative potential of his conflict, Baldwin turns Hemingway to his own uses in *Giovanni's Room*.

## §

Jessica Kent is full-time lecturer for the Boston University College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program. Her recent dissertation, "Novelizing Henry James: Contemporary Fiction's Obsession with the Master and His Work," addresses fictional depictions of Henry James in contemporary novels, arguing that James's innovative depictions of consciousness and identity have led to the popularity of his figure today. Her work has been published in *The Henry James Review*, and she was the 2015 recipient of the Leon Edel Prize.



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## Notes

1. I am indebted to some earlier essays that offer admirable models for such a comparison, for example, Gary Edward Holcomb's "*The Sun Also Rises* in Queer Black Harlem: Hemingway and McKay's Modernist Intertext" (2007) and Brian Hochman's "Ellison's Hemingways" (2008).
2. Holcomb and Scruggs refer to the preface to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, where Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay write that this distinct origin is oral, characterized by "the traditional antiphonal 'call/response' structure peculiar to African and African American expressive cultural forms" (1997, xxxviii). Gates and McKay suggest the African American tradition is particularly self-enclosed:

The editors of the monumental anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1944) called the practice of repetition and revision "a sort of literary inbreeding which causes Negro writers to be influenced by other Negroes more than should ordinarily be expected." If Virginia Woolf was correct when she claimed that "books speak to other books," it is also true that works of literature created by African Americans often extend, or signify upon, other works in the black tradition, structurally and thematically. (xxxvi)

3. Gates defines his terms as follows: "Black texts Signify upon other black texts in the tradition by engaging in what Ellison has defined as implicit formal critiques of language use, of rhetorical strategy. Literary Signification, then, is similar to parody and pastiche, wherein parody corresponds to what I am calling motivated Signification while pastiche would correspond roughly to unmotivated Signification" (1988, xxvii).
4. *The Sun Also Rises* will be cited as *SAR*.
5. For a detailed reading of how this scene parallels one in *Giovanni's Room*, see Parker 2012, 49–51.
6. Yasmin DeGout has highlighted Baldwin's ambivalent representation of homosexual love (1992, 432). For Kenneth Lynn (1987), Hemingway's text inscribes similar complexity. Lynn points out that Hemingway derived Jake Barnes's name from associations with two famous lesbians ("Natalie Barney, 20 rue Jacob; Djuna Barnes, Hotel Jacob") and suggests that the author's closest



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identification is with a female character: "In her unquenchable unhappiness, Brett was Hemingway" (1987, 325).

7. Jake expresses his disgust for the group of gay men at the *bal musette*, and David expresses his disapproval of the gay men who frequent Guillaume's bar. Both scenes occur on the night when the protagonists first encounter their primary love interest, Brett and Giovanni, respectively. In both cases the gay men appear to be marked as other but also emerge as connected to the protagonist (neither they nor Jake will make "proper use" of Georgette; like them, David is a regular at a gay bar). And Jake's use of Georgette to pass as a sexually potent heterosexual man is similar to David's use of his American friend Sue to enact an unsatisfying and temporary appearance of heterosexuality.

8. *Giovanni's Room* will be cited as *GR*.

9. Two recent readings of *Giovanni's Room* are particularly interesting in this regard. Abdur-Rahman (2015) argues that *Giovanni's Room* anticipates a deconstructive approach to identity that understands selfhood as constructed relationally, in contrast to a marginalized other. Drawing on Baldwin's comment in a 1979 interview that "white people invented black people to protect themselves against something which frightened them" (quoted in Abdur-Rahman 2015, 167), Abdur-Rahman argues that David's white identity depends upon the abjected black (and homosexual) body. However, he claims, this contextual identity is always in danger: "As David constantly violates heteronormative codes and as sexual variance is perceived as the terrain of the socially ousted black (or dark) figure, David undergoes a progressive racialization throughout *Giovanni's Room* that throws his avowed whiteness into question and makes possible his own redemption" (168).

Stephanie Li responds to earlier scholars, including Abdur-Rahman, who have identified David with his creator and claimed the character is the author in "whiteface" (2015, 130). Li argues that David is, instead, a study in whiteness: while the opening image of David peering at his reflection shows him "acknowledging the guilt of his white ancestors," later he paints his white lovers with figurative blackness, enjoys the privilege of the white male gaze, and, in speculating authoritatively about the details of Giovanni's crime, "claims the ultimate privilege of whiteness: the ability to articulate and create history" (133, 149–50). My reading, like Li's, accepts David's whiteness. But I stress how the compulsion to achieve the "American normal" of procreative heterosexuality (coded white) affects characters regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation, and how the degree of suffering resulting from this compulsion relates to the myth of American self-determination.



Baldwin's Hemingway: *The Sun Also Rises* in *Giovanni's Room*

10. Hemingway and Baldwin both signal the importance of love triangles using place-name hints, as Joshua Parker points out: "As Jake unknowingly prepares to make his entrance on a scene where he, Brett, and her soon-to-be lover first meet together as a trio, he approaches the impending meeting via the rue des Pyramides," and "David reads of Hella's impending return in the midst of his affair with Giovanni in the Place des Pyramides" (2012, 42).

11. See Campbell 1991, 89.

12. These connections suggest that David's heterosexism is not a personal failing but part of an inevitable systemic heterosexism. Though this pressure makes David's struggle darker, what is interesting is that it affects both straight and queer characters. Loveless marriage engagements in both novels illustrate that even Baldwin's Hella and the straight Hemingway characters long for a domestic and procreative heterosexuality that remains unattainable to them. In "The Male Prison," Baldwin writes, "No matter what encyclopedias of physiological and scientific knowledge are brought to bear the answer [to the question of whether homosexuality is natural] never can be Yes. And one of the reasons for this is that it would rob the normal—who are simply the many—of their very necessary sense of security and order" (1998, 232). The passage suggests the normal and the not-normal are distinct groups pitted against one another, while the universal struggles of these fictional characters suggest instead that "the normal" is a standard that oppresses all individuals, regardless of their sexuality.

13. Julian B. Carter writes that non-normativity like Baldwin's can place one in "a position of considerable critical insight, because people whose lives are shaped by their difference from the normal perforce must know a great deal about both their own positions and the ones that oppress them," while normality like Hemingway's might invite "the (empirically inaccurate) conviction that one's own position is simply natural and devoid of political meaning" (2007, 22).

14. In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison writes, "All that [Hemingway] wrote—and this is very important—was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy" ([1953] 1995, 140). Holcomb and Scruggs write that the blues singer "does not try to solve problems or conflicts, but 'he' does acknowledge and articulate them. He understands that there are no panaceas for pain and suffering, but he sees that they 'cooperate' with his creative imagination to make his song" (2012, 5).



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## Reviews

*American Poetry after Modernism: The Power of the Word*, by Albert Gelpi.  
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 316 pages.

Steven Gould Axelrod

Albert Gelpi has now completed his critical trilogy on US poetry, a project nearly fifty years in the making. The trilogy—composed of *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet* (1975), *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910–1950* (1987), and this present book, *American Poetry after Modernism: The Power of the Word* (2015)—is a rare scholarly enterprise. It closely examines high points in American poetic history from Edward Taylor to Susan Howe. I can think of a handful of similarly ambitious projects over the years: Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), Hyatt Waggoner's *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (1968), Edwin Fussell's *Lucifer in Harness: American Meter, Metaphor, and Diction* (1973), and Mutlu Konuk Blasing's *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms* (1987). But none of these was published recently, and none took three volumes and almost a half-century to complete. None has quite the scale and sustained ambition of this enterprise. Gelpi's trilogy is unique.

It must be admitted that the trilogy has a major limitation, of which the author seems aware—a fatal flaw in the project's highest aspirations. But let's defer consideration of that issue for a while as we consider the very real achievements of the trilogy and of the present, culminating volume.

*The Tenth Muse*, essentially a study of nineteenth-century American poetry though it does find a foundation in the seventeenth-century writings of Edward Taylor, sought to pursue a formalist methodology while still associating the poetic text with the living consciousness—and the unconscious—of the poet who produced it. Indeed, Gelpi saw the close engagement of the poem with the poet as a feature that differentiates American poetry from British. The book attempted to modify the discursive orientation of honored precursors, the New Critics, with a humanistic and psychological awareness. It was a study of words on a page that arise within the discursive institution of poetry, yet remain attached



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to an embodied author with a certain way of perceiving and ordering experience. As Gelpi put it, his purpose was “integrative: to combine a literary-historical and textual reading of the poems with a psychological sensitivity” (1975, xi). Relatively traditional in its views of both textual artistry and the psychic process of creativity, the book was nevertheless quietly innovative in its effort to synthesize the two. Equally important, the book implicitly established a canon of American poetry before 1900, consisting of Taylor, Emerson, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson.

The book’s most memorable and influential achievement is its emphasis on Dickinson, who was still a contested figure in 1975. Floyd Stovall’s canon-making *Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism* first appeared in 1956 and is still in print today; a revised version, edited by James Woodress, appeared in 1963, and was further revised and republished in 1971. This volume, in all of its iterations, included the same eight writers: Emerson, Hawthorne, James, Melville, Poe, Thoreau, Twain, and Whitman—but not Dickinson. So when Gelpi concluded his study with a chapter on Dickinson—a chapter that was far longer and more intense than any of the others—he was certifying that the US literary canon had a new, female member. Gelpi argued that Dickinson was, in fact, the most complex and even heroic poet in nineteenth-century America. He found “much more fundamental inconsistency in Dickinson than in Whitman, for all his talk about self-contradiction, precisely because she accepts interplay and counterplay as the condition of consciousness and takes the risks involved in living them out” (1975, 222).

*A Coherent Splendor* (1987), arriving a dozen years after *The Tenth Muse*, had two different, though related, arguments to make. First, it portrayed modernist poems as both coherent and splendid, as opposed to more avant-garde studies that were finding the texts either indeterminate, self-reflexive, or failed: for example, Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), J. Hillis Miller’s *The Linguistic Moment* (1985), and Andrew Ross’s *The Failure of Modernism* (1986). Secondly, the book asserted, “Modernists, for all of their loud inveighing against Romanticism, longed for and adopted positions that are unmistakably, though sometimes covertly, Romantic” (1987, 5). Again, Gelpi was bringing the poetic texts into close proximity to the individual psyches that produced them, however much Eliot might attempt to distinguish (in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot [1919] 1975, 41).



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Gelpi turned Eliot, Pound, and H.D. from classicists into at least partial romanticists. And he placed the more evidently post-romantic Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Hart Crane at the heart of modernism along with them. Even the anti-modernists Yvor Winters and Robinson Jeffers had notable romantic strains in their work, if one bothered to look. For Gelpi, the whole poetic field of American poetry from 1900 to 1950 was suffused with romantic attitudes and issues. Everyone who mattered reflected the romantic gestalt wherein subject and object encountered and completed each other, just as Gelpi had previously observed in Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson. Whether the modernist poets functioned mainly as imagists, rendering a genuine experience of the world (Pound, Williams, H.D.), or as symbolists, expressing internal psychic states (Eliot, Crane, Stevens), they were always concerned with subjectivity, whatever they might say about “Impersonality” (Eliot) or “a machine made of words” (Williams). The marriage Gelpi was trying to stage—between words and feelings—remained intact.

The defense of that union remains central to *American Poetry after Modernism* as well. Yet the underlying notion of American poets being “pioneers of the psyche” (Gelpi 1975, x) is now under siege as never before. According to Gelpi, poetry of the post-World War II era stages “a dialectic between Neoromanticism and Postmodernism” (2015, 15). Romanticism, with its emphasis on subjectivity, is still in there pitching, but Language, newly empowered and self-aware, has begun to hit the ball out of the park. Poetry as an affective structure and as an attempt at world-making increasingly struggles to hold its own against a poetry of foregrounded, incohesive signs. Postmodernism, with its illegible relations between poem and poet, and poem and world, has begun to carry the day. This new book retains a strong allegiance to the “integrative” project with which the trilogy began, but it perceives that things are not going its way. Neoromantic poets, with their laudable “vision of human life that gives direction and purpose to their words” (15), are gradually losing ground to postmodern poets, whose privileging of fragmentation and discontinuity turns their poems into mere “self-referencing semiotic code” (10). This final volume of the trilogy treats the slow diminishment of a humanistic tradition in US poetry with regret, nostalgia, and something like grief. It is a twilit conclusion to an enterprise that started out expressing what Emerson would have called “morning wishes” ([1867] 1994, 178).



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*American Poetry after Modernism* spends most of its time on poets committed to a cohesive subject, to spiritual awareness, and to "the word's communicable referentiality to reality and truth" (14). After an "overview" of the era, the book devotes a chapter to Robert Lowell and John Berryman's construction of a "language of crisis" (16), a poetic mode in which "autobiography became apocalypse" (17). Gelpi thus restores Lowell to his former primacy in the poetic constellation, and he grants to Berryman a prominence he never quite attained before. These are useful corrections, and they contribute to the growth of interest in both poets in the new century. Gelpi tells the story of Lowell and Berryman through a chronological tracing of their lives and oeuvres, emphasizing their ambivalent friendship and their parallel aesthetic and spiritual struggles. He provides some sterling close readings of selected poems by both poets, emphasizing their early and late work instead of their middle poems, which are usually considered the heart of the matter. Gelpi sees these ambivalent friends as moving in similar directions. Lowell turns from religious and artistic vision to postmodern indeterminacy and then, at the very end, glances backward to his starting point; Berryman begins with dislocated language and edges toward a neoromantic recovery of the significance of the Word. Both poets, for Gelpi, possessed "the heroic determination to demonstrate the adequacy of the poetic medium" in an era when the adequacy of poetic language was under attack (58).

Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery come next, inventing and empowering a "language of flux" (59). Again Gelpi moves through the poets' careers chronologically, linking the poets to each other and to significant precursors and peers, and providing lucid commentary on selected poems. The pairing of the older, epistemologically oriented Bishop with the younger, linguistically oriented Ashbery at first seems strained but ultimately makes a good deal of sense, as Gelpi deftly exposes continuities and discontinuities between the two poets' engagements with time and change. His focus on "subject matter" (76) in Ashbery may skew his overall understanding of the poet, but it also helps him put Ashbery and Bishop on the same page. And it does reveal something resonant: "the lingering disquiet that dogs Ashbery's life in language: the hankering actually to name and identify the subject of all these verbal negotiations" (94). Gelpi discovers in Ashbery a submerged reflection of his own yearning for something beyond the play of language.



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Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Everson employ varieties of “the language of incarnation” (95). Gelpi views Ginsberg and Kerouac as unabashedly neoromantic and thus the kind of poets for whom he has a natural affinity. His discussion of the two ends with a consideration of Kerouac’s vestigially Catholic understanding of the sinful, suffering, and redeemable human body. The story of Kerouac’s imputed spiritual quest, cut short by alcoholism (and, one might add, violence), leads to Everson’s very different and more successful moves from pantheism into Catholicism and then back “to nature, now with a Christian perspective” (136). Gelpi’s keen analysis of Everson’s play on *declare* / *clarus* / *light* in one of his poems, translating “word into light, light into word” (137), probably represents the spiritual heart of this book.

Next comes a single poet, Gelpi’s longtime friend and colleague Adrienne Rich, whom Gelpi identifies with a “language of witness” (158). Like other critics, Gelpi focuses on the topic of change in Rich’s work, seeing it operating throughout the oeuvre and not simply in the 1970s when Rich established her social identity as a lesbian feminist. The high point of the chapter, as is so often the case, is not in the poetic positioning of Rich (a neoromantic in contrast to Ashbery the postmodernist) but in the subtle close reading of selected poems, unpacked in terms of circumambient theoretical frames but also in terms of their verbal complexities. As in the pages on Lowell, Gelpi does a particularly fine job with the poems of the poet’s final years.

Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan maintained a warm and productive friendship for decades and then, distracted by the furies unleashed by the Vietnam War, ended their relationship. Together Levertov and Duncan represented what Marjorie Perloff has called “the spiritual wing of Black Mountain poetics” (2004, 11). Gelpi’s chapter devoted to their “language of vision” is one of the high points in the book. He loves these poets, has edited their correspondence, and sees in them a specular image of his own interest in spiritual and religious vision. Whereas Gelpi’s more typical method is to tell his poets’ stories serially (Lowell then Berryman, Bishop then Ashbery), he tells the stories of Levertov and Duncan simultaneously (as he did the stories of Ginsberg and Kerouac). It’s more the story of a friendship, of interwoven subjectivities, than the story of two wholly distinct individuals. Levertov and Duncan complement, complicate, and complete each other—Levertov the genius of particularity, Duncan the master of abstraction and perspective. Gelpi interprets Duncan’s “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow”



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as a glowing, hypnotic example of his “conceptual imagination,” while portraying Levertov’s “The Ripple” as a beautiful example of her “perceptual imagination” (175). Yes, the relentless binary arrangement of materials in this book becomes exhausting, but it also liberates many of Gelpi’s best and most useful insights. It’s his way of knowing, and we need to accept it, at least while reading, as the price we pay to receive the book’s illuminations.

The last major chapter before the conclusion is a gargantuan effort to parley with the enemy, postmodernism. Gelpi predictably divides the contemporary scene in two: the “modest, tempered, ecological Neoromanticism” of such poets as Robert Hass and Mary Oliver and the “combative, highly theorized Postmodernism” of such poets as Robert Creeley, Lyn Hejinian, and Susan Howe (207). One might expect him to gravitate toward the ecological poets he favors, but he surprisingly does not give them even a chapter, gravitating instead to the fascination of what’s difficult. In the longest chapter of the book, he grapples with the Language poets (and Creeley, their precursor), seeking out hints of neoromantic spirituality in their texts. The chapter, while admirable in its risk-taking, ultimately makes uncomfortable reading. Employing his usual method of interspersing the story of a poet’s life and work with commentary on representative or distinguished poems, Gelpi seems to be imposing a series of master narratives on the work of poets whose very purpose is to subvert master narratives. There is a misalliance here between critical method and poems and, I would add, between critic and poets. Gelpi concedes that “not all Language poetry is games and gimmicks” (230), but his use of Freudian negation (“not all Language poetry”) reveals his initial suspicion that it is indeed all games and gimmicks. Perhaps Gelpi wanted to confront his opponents in their den; or perhaps he grew tired of his neoromantic friends and hoped to make different ones.

Being a brilliant close reader of poetry, Gelpi occasionally provides interpretations that open up texts in new and interesting ways, even if the theoretical frameworks surrounding them groan with stress. The analysis of Susan Howe, for example, goes well, probably because Gelpi can access her words through familiar Puritan and Transcendental paradigms. Similarly, his analysis of Fanny Howe gains strength from their shared fascination with “blessedness” (269). Lacking such entry points, however, the critic tends to grow bored with his postmodern encounters. After explicating part of a paragraph in Hejinian’s great *My Life*, for example, he observes that he has engaged with only about one-fifth of a single section in the



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forty-five-section poem, implying that to have explicated more would have put him and the reader to sleep. (Actually it was about one-fourth of the section, Gelpi's hyperbole being another expression of his discontent.) His analysis of *My Life* ends with notably faint praise: the series, he says, is one of the "most widely discussed and admired" (236) texts in Language poetry. Gelpi cannot bring himself to say that he himself admires it. A gifted critic has been reduced to going through the motions; a vital and mysterious poem has been rendered lifeless. Never has the common wisdom that you should write about what you love seemed more apt.

Gelpi concludes *American Poetry after Modernism* by taking the long view, surveying the field from the Puritans to the present day. Oddly, he locates hope in the very poets he wasn't motivated to write about: Robert Hass, Mary Oliver, Jorie Graham, and Louise Glück. Now that I've turned the last page, it's time for me to consider all of the many poets discussed in this book and in the trilogy, and finally to acknowledge the elephant in the room. No poet of color has played a significant role in any of these three books. Five poets receive major status in the first book, eleven in the second, and sixteen in the third. Every one of these thirty-two poets is white. This is surely a disabling limitation. Although centuries of culture have legitimated this distortion, it could have been challenged even in 1975 when the first book appeared; should have been challenged in 1987 when the second book appeared and said nothing about the Harlem Renaissance; and needed to have been challenged and discarded by 2015 when the concluding book appeared and gave no recognition to any of the poets of color who have so distinguished themselves in the period since World War II.

Gelpi acknowledges this limitation at the outset of *American Poetry after Modernism*: "I don't discuss a number of poets whose work is less relevant to the questions of form and language that I am pursuing. In particular, I should note the emergence of African-American, Latino, and Asian-American poets in this period, but the strong focus on issues of ethnic identity in the dominant culture, important for all Americans as these issues are, mean that most of this poetry starts with and is sustained by a different set of questions" (ix). But questions of form and language are central to poets of color, and the failure to address those questions weakens the book. The text fails to enter the world of diversity, to awaken from the dream of whiteness. Gelpi writes that he regrets leaving out Langston Hughes and Nathaniel Mackey. Why didn't he include them then? His defense quoted above is basically an evasion. In the chapter



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called “The Language of Crisis” he could easily have included Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Amiri Baraka, and the chapter would have been stronger for the addition. In the “Poetry of Witness,” at least a dozen poets of color have strong claims for inclusion. In the final chapter on avant-garde poets, what is the rationale for not including a distinguished poet such as John Yau, Harryette Mullen, Nathaniel Mackey, or Claudia Rankine?

The flaw in this book is that it fails to reveal a multiplicitous American culture; fails, therefore, to employ Gelpi’s key idea of “the word’s communicable referentiality to reality and truth” (14). It does not offer an image of American poetic achievement we can recognize. It does not accurately reflect the past nor move us toward our future. It’s an important work about European-American poetry but not, as it intends, about American poetry in its entirety. Without question *American Poetry after Modernism* should be read. It has excellent things to say about Lowell, Ashbery, Everson, Rich, Levertov, Duncan, and Susan Howe. The trilogy as a whole tells a compelling story about one branch of ethnically identified poetry. But with a more inclusive approach, the book and the trilogy could have achieved more.



Steven Gould Axelrod is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside. Among his publications are *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, *The New Anthology of American Poetry*, volumes 1–3 (with Camille Roman and Thomas Travisano), and a forthcoming edition of Robert Lowell’s *Memoirs* (with Grzegorz Kości).

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*Ghostly Figures: Memory and Belatedness in Postwar American Poetry*, by Ann Keniston. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. 228 pages.

Eric Falci

In *Ghostly Figures: Memory and Belatedness in Postwar American Poetry*, Ann Keniston reopens two topics that are central to thinking about poetry but that each present a number of potential snares for the scholar who aims to train a critical eye upon them: temporality and figuration. Both topics are seemingly ubiquitous; they are not only the subjects of myriad books and articles written over the past several decades, but they are also topics that have occupied poets incessantly. In a number of respects, these two issues are at the very heart of the poetic enterprise, and so taking them on is akin to taking on nearly everything that might matter about poetry. Many of the most important statements about and theories of poetry over the past several hundred years emerge out of a consideration of one or the other of these issues, whether Wordsworth's theory of the affective temporality of poetic composition ("the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that is, some time later, composed as a poem, "emotion recollected in tranquility" [Gill 1984, 611]) or Eliot's notion of the proper mechanism for figuring emotion in poetry (the "objective correlative" [1953, 107]). For the most part, Keniston's interests in the temporalities and figures of poetry aren't directly focused on the act of composition, and her goal in *Ghostly Figures* is not to wrestle once again with Wordsworth or Eliot (although each comes to the surface at several points). However, her framing of these central issues introduces another set of formidable critical precursors. Near the start of her introduction, Keniston provides an important gloss on her central motif: "The often impacted tropes and figures in postwar poems reveal their inextricability from the difficulties of belatedness" (5). So, on the one hand, Keniston means to intervene in a topic over which a small cache of essays by Paul de Man still holds remarkable sway. And, on the other hand, she aims to revive a term—belatedness—that is still bound to Harold Bloom's theory of literary influence. Keniston's argument isn't dedicated to overturning these powerful theories emerging from New Haven in the 1970s, and de Man's influence in particular is evident throughout the volume. Rather,



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Keniston aims to reroute her central themes—figuration, lyric address, belatedness—around these influential deconstructionist accounts of them, in order to make them newly relevant and vibrant within contemporary poetry criticism.

This is part of the great value of Keniston's volume: under the broad rubric of "belatedness," she provides an account of postwar American poetry that manages to reenergize and complicate a series of fundamental concepts. By examining the ways in which a handful of American poets from the past sixty years have figured belatedness and have experimented with and within the temporalities of poetic form and lyric address, Keniston's volume intercedes in current debates about lyric theory in the area in which the so-called New Lyric Studies is least well developed: the relationship between theories of lyric and contemporary poetry that, in whatever way, might be said to partake of some of the energies of lyric writing. The central figures associated with New Lyric Studies—Virginia Jackson, Yopie Prins, and, in a different way, Jonathan Culler—aren't prominent figures in Keniston's volume, but it is helpful to understand her work within this larger field. More particularly, *Ghostly Figures* shows, implicitly if not directly, a path that might—that should—be taken by those critics interested in lyric theory and historical poetics. That is to say, her volume might help New Lyric Studies turn more productively toward the consideration of new poetry.

In Keniston's account, "belatedness" is a multivalent term. In its more literal sense, it refers to the complex lag endemic to memory, to a broader structure of feeling (what we might call the feeling of "post-"), to the difficulties of representing the past and especially historical trauma, and in a more literary-critical sense to the ways that writers relate to their precursors (in a quasi-Bloomian way). But Keniston's argument also turns on the figurative possibilities of the term and, more specifically, on the ways that poets approach the difficult condition of belatedness via figuration. This makes for poems that, in some fashion, "indicate that they are too late," whether by offering "distorted chronologies" (3), staging impossible or confected scenarios of remembrance, or dwelling on their own need to repeat themselves or on their inability to come to a close. Such modes of discursive or diegetic belatedness also manifest formally, as these poems manipulate "at times violently, their own formal structures, employing tropes and figures in ways that interrogate equivalence, proximity, and intimacy." These various kinds of belatedness do not remain discrete, and Keniston proceeds by tracking what she calls



the "entanglement of the literal and figurative" (4) in the work of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Frank Bidart, Mark Doty, Paul Monette, D. A. Powell, Thom Gunn, James Merrill, Jorie Graham, and Susan Howe. Plath, Rich, Graham, and Howe are each given their own chapters, and for the most part Keniston focuses on a single volume from each poet. The male poets are all grouped into a single chapter about poems about AIDS. The chapters move chronologically, from Plath to Howe, but they also can be grouped so as to highlight the three kinds of figuration that are central to Keniston's account. To put it somewhat too schematically: chapter 1 (Plath) is about metaphor, chapters 2 (Rich) and 3 (AIDS poetry) are about address, and chapters 4 (Graham) and 5 (Howe) are about metonymy. A brief coda addresses several additional poets (John Ashbery, Ben Lerner, Robert Pinsky) and turns the larger question over by thinking not about the difficulties that poems face when trying to look back, but those that appear when they seek to peak forward so as to look back from an imagined future, a sort of proleptic belatedness.

Primarily, Keniston is interested in a particular kind of discursive and rhetorical problem, namely, how the poems she discusses "in different ways reanimate the past even as they acknowledge its remoteness" (122). Foregrounding address and figuration as they are deployed and performed in a broad stretch of postwar American poetry allows Keniston to map a compelling and original trajectory through the broader field of contemporary literature, juxtaposing figures who aren't normally linked, and moving across the spectrum of poetic practices, from poets whose work accords with conventional understandings of lyric to those writers who much more adamantly experiment with and overturn such conventions. One of the great strengths of this valuable book is that it is able to account for such different styles and kinds of postwar poetry. Keniston is just as powerful a reader of Plath's explosive poetry as she is of Howe's complex surfaces. *Ghostly Figures* is able to hold together important new readings of Plath's most well known and controversial poems ("Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus") with new perspectives on the amalgamated long lines of Powell's *Tea*, the dense formalism of Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*, and the palimpsestic textures of Howe's *The Midnight*. This feat alone demonstrates Keniston's critical facility and the significance of her new volume. Keniston's close readings are consistently well done and often riveting, and she has structured the volume so that it unfolds a transformation in the mechanics of poetic figuration, at least within the space of postwar American poetry. Part of the fatigue of belatedness



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is a fatigue with figuration itself, and Keniston does a marvelous job of showing how the poetics of belatedness that she articulates is premised upon a large-scale shift from metaphor to metonymy, with Howe's work in particular standing as a model of a poetics that might sublimate and transform belatedness rather than symptomatize it or stage it formally. For Keniston, *The Midnight* offers "a way out of the lingering and often conflicted allegiance to metaphor and simile that characterizes the work" (153) of the other poets in the volume. In this and other ways, Keniston's book offers a compelling account of postwar and contemporary American poetry.

At the same time, my one hesitation about the book concerns its central premise. It isn't that I don't think that Keniston is right in her argument, it's that the argument itself relies on a term—belatedness—whose conceptual remit is sometimes stretched too far. At times, it seems like belatedness simply names too much, and so begins to lose its edge as a critical term. Keniston states that the poems she covers begin "with the assumption of irrevocable belatedness," and that while "belatedness can be located in poetry written during different time periods, a particularly acute consciousness of coming after is fundamental to postwar American culture" (9). Soon after, she specifies that the poets she's interested in "exploit the condition of belatedness" and that their poems "enact belatedness" (15). This whole set of claims might be true, but it is difficult to get a sense of how the poets and poems she writes about do these things differently, or more significantly, than lots of other poets who predate them. In a similar way, Keniston emphasizes the ways in which her chosen poems not only deploy complex modes of figuration but also "interrogate the figures on which [they] rely" (25). She goes on to provide extensive readings to demonstrate this claim, detailing Plath's fissured metaphors, Rich's asymmetrical modes of address, the vexed prosopopoeia of poetry about AIDS, Graham's collapsing of likeness and lateness, and Howe's spatialized metonymies. One, however, can't help but wonder whether the kinds of broken figurations and untimely addresses that Keniston tracks and describes as both instances and formal shapings of belatedness are in fact more apparent or notable in this body of poetry than in any other, or whether her notion of belatedness itself isn't a redesignation of a much broader nest of concepts, one that subtends nearly all poetry: desire, absence, aporia, mortality, distance, decay—all those vexations of time and space that have spurred poets to think through the disunified or disassociated quality of experience and history. If we have long



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understood that language, and especially written language, is premised on fissure—between sound and letter, voice and text, signifier and signified, tenor and vehicle—then belatedness may simply rename an underlying condition, one that tracks (at least in terms of lyric poetry) at least back to Sappho. As with turtles, it may be belatedness all the way down.

This, however, might be the wrong way to look at it, and in any case Keniston anticipates just such an argument in her introduction: “If belatedness as a concept remains hard to identify when it is implied and unstable when it is explicit, this is part of my point. Belatedness is itself a kind of ghost in postwar poems, perhaps most evident when the figures through which it is represented collapse or implode, revealing that they have been ghostly all along” (27). “Ghostly all along.” This seems quite a good description not only of postwar poems but of poems more broadly—their diegetic scrims, their deictic overlays, their echoes and reverberations, their figurations that at once bid for translucency and offer opacity, their strange submergence in and emergence from a long history of poets and poems. The point, then, is not to object by suggesting that this has all happened before, but to investigate how it happens now. And Keniston does that wonderfully. In detailed, nuanced, and theoretically deft readings of a number of the major American poets of the past sixty years, Keniston shows us the particularities of belatedness, the forms it takes, the effects it has, and the ways that it can’t help but to shape much of the significant poetry of our own—deeply belated—historical moment.

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Eric Falci is associate professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966–2010* and the *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry, 1945–2010*, as well as various essays on modern and contemporary Irish and British poetry. He is currently working on a book about the relationship between poetry and music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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*Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry*, by Justin Quinn. Oxford University Press, 2015. 218 pages.

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Justin Quinn's new book tracks the movement of Central and Eastern European (primarily Czech) and American, British, and Irish poets and poetry across the Iron Curtain between 1948 and 1989. As Quinn stresses, the unassuming preposition *across* is key to his approach. Studies that remain on either side of the Cold War's principal geopolitical divide, or within a single nation or language, afford only "an impoverished sense of the unprecedented transnational dynamic of the era" (42) and its poetry. Nor will comparison of putatively discrete traditions suffice to enrich that sense. *Between Two Fires* instead returns to one of the foundational insights of transnational studies, namely James Clifford's description of cultural exchange and other "practices of displacement . . . as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (quoted in Quinn, 24). Quinn emphasizes poetry's traversal of "the well-policed borders [and] formidable linguistic obstacles" of the Cold War. *Between Two Fires* attempts to show how poetry "was transformed in the process" (25) and by the circumstances of its own movement during the conflict.

Quinn's history begins with the treacherous conditions in which Jan Zábana, in 1950s Prague, translated radical American poets into Czech (chapter 2). It then moves to the critical, institutional, and interpersonal means by which Mirsolav Holub and other poets of Warsaw Pact nations achieved extraordinary visibility in the field of Anglophone poetry beginning in the 1960s (chapter 3). Recounting how Czech and American poets came to read and reimagine one another's work from within their respective Cold War contexts, these core chapters constitute a significant contribution to the transnational literary history of the latter half of the twentieth century. Quinn's subtle translations and readings of Zábana and Holub alone would be of value; but no other scholar offers anything approaching so textured an analysis, in English, of the literary-cultural field in Prague during the first two decades of the Cold War, from the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's seizure of power in early 1948 through the Prague Spring of 1968. The book makes a persuasive case that it is "impossible to form a complete picture



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of poetry in the [Cold War] US or UK without reference to translations from [the] world" (3) on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

The opening chapter positions *Between Two Fires* in relation to recent work in world literature, Cold War cultural studies, and transnational literary studies. By Quinn's reckoning, these fields have broadly neglected the geographic mobility, aesthetic and linguistic malleability, and political manipulability of Cold War-era poetry. Although this stocktaking chapter too often siphons off its critical energy by calling out weaknesses in other scholars' work, its attention to the mutual implication of transnational and Cold War cultural studies will prove instructive for scholars in both fields. Drawing on Stephen Clingman's (2009) work on narrative, Quinn observes that transnational criticism broadly replicates established "routes of scholarship, above all through the binaries of modernism and postmodernism, colonialism and postcolonialism" (21). For Quinn's project, the latter binary is of greater concern than the former. Since the "structure of center-periphery that marks postcolonial theory . . . persists in transnational criticism in the form of the First World-Third World framework" (3-4), that criticism perforce neglects the literature of the "Second World" (5).<sup>1</sup> Quinn further observes that transnational literary scholarship tends to restrict itself to a single language, English, and to a single genre, the novel. The study most proximate to *Between Two Fires*, Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), is an exception to the genre rule of transnational literary studies as Quinn describes it.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Quinn sees the field's preference for the novel as tacitly replaying dated assumptions about poetry's remove from "political-cultural debate" (4).

One must understand that, in *Between Two Fires*, "political-cultural debate" or simply "politics" pertains almost exclusively to questions of nation or empire, state maneuver, and Cold War ideology. Politics equals geopolitics. Herein lies a major limitation that Quinn could profitably have addressed. He asserts that "the emphasis on other narratives, like postcolonialism and feminism" (25) has resulted in critical neglect of "transnational literary movement" (24) during the Cold War. With respect to the former "narrative," chapter 4 argues for a critical reframing of the postcolonial turn as a Cold War phenomenon; more specifically, it maintains that the rise of postcolonial theory informed the work and unduly amplified the international renown of Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott. Quinn's argument with postcolonial studies can border on the tendentious, but the argument is at least made. By



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contrast, *Between Two Fires* all but ignores the feminist and gender politics similarly effected during, and limited by, the Cold War. After an illuminating keynote reading of Muriel Rukeyser's "Poem (I lived in the first century of world wars)" alongside three renderings of Osip Mandelstam's poem titled in English "The Tartars, Uzbeks," the work of women poets and the political lives of women recede almost entirely from *Between Two Fires*. This absence is glaring, not least because from its start the field of Cold War cultural studies has analyzed how state policies, foreign and domestic, regulated the lives of women during the nominally "cold" war. But Quinn's unexplained omission risks replaying its own set of dated assumptions about women's remove from geopolitical concerns.

The opening chapter argues that transnational poetry of the Cold War demands a critical approach that, first, respects "the autonomy of poetry and literature"; this approach must neither "reduc[e poems] to epiphenomena of foreign affairs" nor deny a poem's imbrication in or expression of political "forces" (13). Second, Quinn argues for an approach that gathers poems and poets under the sign of "conversation," rather than comparison. Despite repeated invocation, the critical frame of Cold War "conversation" remains too vague to be fully persuasive. The word evokes an ideal exchange among poets who send out "signals" to one another or "to the world" and across various kinds of borders (60). Yet the most compelling work in *Between Two Fires* concerns specific barriers and inducements to cultural exchange. In contrast to the abstraction of "conversation," Quinn's two vital chapters on the Czech situation demonstrate the critical rewards of probing how various mechanisms—including translation, citation, editing, publishing, travel, marketing, reportage, face-to-face conversation, and, in at least one instance, espionage—alternately thwarted and facilitated the transnational movement of poetry during the Cold War.

"Translations of the Other World" (chapter 2) concentrates on *The Fifth Season: An Anthology of American Radical Poetry* (1959), edited and translated into Czech by Zábřana. The anthology collects poetry critical of the American political regime and thus looks like "a literary artifact useful to the *Kulturkampf* of the Communist Party in its battle against US imperialism" (73). Why would Zábřana—whose parents were imprisoned by a communist regime on "false charges of high treason" and whose entire career testifies to his political resistance to such actions—have produced such an artifact (71)? Faced with this apparent paradox, Quinn's ingenious strategy is to tease out "several possible rationales for Zábřana's



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work,” and thereby to “illuminate the cultural dynamics of a period in which conjecture about the motivation behind a literary artifact is integral to its production and reception” (70). By championing the “aesthetic worth” of poets such as Thomas McGrath and Allen Ginsberg, Zábbrana exposed a hypocrisy at the heart of the American New Critical program. The poet-translator perceived that “the public insistence” on the criterion of “aesthetic value [had become] a quiet way to import anticommunist ideology” and suppress leftist resistance in US poetry (79).<sup>3</sup> Given that the radical *Fifth Season* poets were “anti-establishment figures, like [Zábbrana] himself,” who could not easily “be co-opted to Czechoslovak communism” (86), they also offered Zábbrana “an allegory of the Czech situation” and his own place in it. When Quinn finally turns to reading Zábbrana’s sonnets from *Stránky z deníku* (*Pages from a Diary*) (1968), he argues that the forms of the radical American poets informed Zábbrana’s “lyric subterfuge” (88) of Czechoslovak communist ideology.

“Arrival in English” (chapter 3) opens with the influential English critic, editor, and poet A. Alvarez. In 1962, Alvarez both published *The New Poetry*, the anthology of “Extremist” poets that helped “set the course of the poetic mainstream for at least two decades to come” (98), and traveled to Eastern Europe and the United States to interview writers and intellectuals for the BBC Third Programme. Alvarez’s travels “marked the beginning of the rise of Eastern European poets in English” (107). Soon thereafter, Alvarez began publishing English translations of Central and Eastern European poets’ work in the *Observer*, where he was an editor; later in the 1960s, he ushered many “Second World” poets into the Anglophone literary world, in his capacity as editor of the Penguin Modern European Poets series. Quinn describes Alvarez’s projects as not simply contemporaneous with but inextricable from each other. This case, too, proceeds from an apparent inconsistency, of which Quinn perhaps makes too much: how could Alvarez, who famously rejected Movement poetics and “gentility” (quoted in Quinn, 99) in all its forms, also reject the Beats? Throughout the 1960s, Quinn writes, Alvarez consistently valued how Extremist poets (e.g., Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath) turned “political motifs” into analogues for “intense emotional states” yet also serially dismissed the Beats for envisioning such states as “contiguous to the zone of the political, neither excluding nor enveloping it” (106). One might argue with Quinn’s parsing of Alvarez’s aesthetic, but a more pressing problem resides in what Quinn thinks that aesthetic did to Anglophone poetry. In a dubious phrase, he writes that Alvarez “gelded”



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Anglophone poetry of its “public, political aspect” (141). Still, Quinn points out that, for Alvarez and the critical culture for which he stands in *Between Two Fires*, the “historical situation” allowed Eastern European poetry to “be about politics in ways” Anglophone poetry could not. Alvarez’s supervision of the translation into English of Zbigniew Herbert, Vasko Popa, and Holub, among others, became a means of smuggling political commitment back into poetry in English (109).

In its liveliest section, chapter 3 turns to Holub and his love of the Beats. This affinity will surprise many readers, since Holub, an immunologist as well as a poet, “projected” an image of himself as a “hard-working scientist, usually dressed in suit and tie, impatient with inflated rhetoric or unorthodox behavior” (130). Against that image, Quinn’s reading of Holub’s “A Dog in the Quarry” alongside Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “Dog” indexes Holub’s “indebtedness” (129) to the Beats. This chapter also weighs the effects on Holub’s poetics of his travel to the United States. For his scientific research, the poet was allowed to visit California for an extended stay in 1962–63. The trip resulted in *Anděl na kolečkách* (*Angel on Wheels*) (1963), a popular book of what Holub called “semi-reportage” (112) about his experience in the United States. Quinn’s revelatory reading of *Angel on Wheels*, which is unavailable in English, substantiates his description of the book as a “brilliant tightrope act” (113). It simultaneously discloses Holub’s “intense involvement with American culture and life at a formative stage in his career” and conveys his “ability to domesticate his analyses in the protean political environment of contemporary Czechoslovakia.” Where some critics still construct Holub as “a kind of dissident” by default, Quinn emphasizes his “political flexibility throughout his career” (115). The correction is vital to the work of *Between Two Fires*: it crystallizes Quinn’s larger attempt to break Anglophone readers’ habit of construing Eastern European poetry in translation as “a fable of resistance to [communist] oppression” (138). His notes on translation contribute vital detail to this revision of “Cold War cliché” (133). He explains, for example, that for Czech readers, Holub’s use of the word *soudruh* (“comrade”) in the poem “Discobolus” carries a “general meaning” that speaks “about the human situation regardless of communism” (133).

Given Quinn’s attunement to Cold War particularities, he is curiously uncritical in his analysis of how Holub himself theorized transnational poetry. He writes that the immunologist-poet’s first trip to California fostered his “transnational approach to poetic language” (115). Holub



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envisioned a poetry that, invested in making sense and freed of the burdens of national and linguistic tradition, would be “as shareable across the world as scientific work is” (116). But Quinn does not consider how Holub’s vision of transnationally “shareable” poetic language runs up against—or conveniently ignores—the realities of competition, secrecy, and brinkmanship that defined Cold War-era science, even as science became the era’s dominant mode of knowledge production.

Holub is the animating spirit of *Between Two Fires*, “a *picaro* who crosses linguistic and national boundaries, as well as the front line in the Cold War” (13). But it is Ginsberg who emerges as the book’s hero. He figures in every chapter: Zábrana translates and also writes of reading Ginsberg; Holub invokes him on “the very first page of *Angel on Wheels*” (123); and, in “Poetry in a Cold World” (chapter 4), Quinn presents Ginsberg as a poet who “consciously constructed his fame” and his sexuality in liberatory relation to Cold War geopolitics and American hegemony. Likening Ginsberg to “a reporter” traveling to “various flash-points along the Iron Curtain,” Quinn argues that the poet’s Cold War career “displays the inventiveness of the poetic imagination in the face of terrible events, and thus offers a model of moral and political empowerment” (170). This hyperbolic assessment of the oppositional efficacy of Ginsberg’s fame remains more insisted upon than substantiated; Michael Davidson’s (2004) work on masculinity and Cold War-era US poetry could have helped to temper it.

In the concluding chapter of *Between Two Fires*, however, Ginsberg’s model of “empowerment” is meant to stand in stark, if not damning, contrast to the careers of two Anglophone poets who, Quinn writes, were more easily and eagerly assimilated to the American political regime of the last two decades of the Cold War: Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott. In Quinn’s view, these poets helped make “postcolonialism safe for America” (186) by advancing a critique of British imperialism that did not implicate the United States. Walcott fares worse than Heaney. Leaning heavily on “Forest of Europe,” Walcott’s 1978 poem for Joseph Brodsky—and in particular on the offending line “there is no harder prison than writing verse” (quoted in Quinn, 156)—Quinn argues that “if one writes about the depredations of empire while remaining silent about those of the present and while holding down a good middle-class job as a university professor in a nation involved in such present depredations, then one might be thought strategic” (171). Quinn writes in a similar vein of Heaney, though he clearly thinks more highly of Heaney’s work and character.



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The most deliberately provocative and least persuasive chapter of *Between Two Fires*, "Poetry in a Cold World" overstates, so as to combat, the dominance of postcolonial theory over the study of late twentieth-century poetry in English. The overstatement is perhaps starkest in Quinn's assessment of Irish studies; he acknowledges that he might sound "accusatory" (193) in his description of the field's overinvestment in a postcolonialism that fails to indict US foreign policy. But this concluding argument also seems misplaced. In chapter 1, Quinn makes more effectively the two most germane metacritical points advanced in the final chapter: first, that scholars of transnationalism perhaps unwittingly perpetuate models or assumptions of postcolonial studies; second, that "postcolonial studies have overlooked the Cold War circumstances of their development" (146). Edward Said's belated "acknowledgment of the Cold War context" (177), Quinn's key example of the latter pattern, could have been taken up in chapter 1. These points are well taken. But Quinn's broader-stroke discussion of the blindspots of postcolonial studies, like his determinedly anti-postcolonial readings of major Anglophone poets, eclipses the final chapter's comparatively limited effort to show, by demonstration, how to pursue alternate and constructively transnational readings of the poets under consideration.

I hope other scholars will take up Quinn's call to seek out the subtle formal and thematic means by which poets Heaney, Brodsky, and Walcott came to anticipate their transnational reception and register their own border crossings. The central sections of Quinn's rich book will provide those scholars a useful model for thinking about how poetry, resilient under pressure, circulated and signified during the Cold War, as well as about how the Cold War and its poetry continue to shape the transnational literary dimensions of our own time.

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Claire Seiler is associate professor of English at Dickinson College. She is currently completing a book manuscript, "Midcentury Suspension." The project fuses archival research in mid-twentieth-century print and public culture, theorizations of modernity and modernisms, and analyses of key texts to offer a new account of the postwar imaginary.



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## Notes

1. The historically apt phrase denotes the bloc of Cold War communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Clare Cavanagh (2009) makes a similar point about critical neglect of Eastern European poetry (see Quinn, 38-39).
2. In his survey of transnational literary studies, Quinn notes only in passing the critical interest in poetry (pointedly not just English-language poetry) that motivates much recent work in the related fields of hemispheric American and "new world" literary studies. See Infante 2013 (from which Quinn draws a critique of Ramazani 2009), Handley 2007, and Read 2009.
3. As Quinn acknowledges, Zábrana shows from outside the US context a version of what scholars including Cary Nelson (2001) and Alan Filreis (2008) have argued from within it.

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# Julian Mayfield and Alternative Civil Rights Literatures

*Steven Belletto*

On August 28, 1963, the Civil Rights Movement had its most triumphant media spectacle in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a moment still enshrined in public memory due in large part to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. But precisely because of the sheer visibility of this event, it has eclipsed other moments that tell different stories about the era, including that of another march for civil rights deliberately held on the very same day an ocean away, in Accra, Ghana. In the summer of 1963, Accra was an exciting place for international civil rights activists: an independent former colony of Great Britain, Ghana was widely viewed as a model for the rest of the decolonizing continent, and its president, Kwame Nkrumah, was not shy about leading his country in ways that ignored Cold War paradigms underwritten by US power. In this environment a group of African American expatriates staged a corollary to the March on Washington that was unflinching in its criticism of the US government's position on race. While the ethos of the March on Washington was embodied by King and his call for the recognition of universal human equality as integral to the American Dream, the Accra demonstrators marched on the US Embassy specifically to decry the lip service paid to equality on the international stage as the Kennedy administration stalled on civil rights legislation at home. Placards carried by the protesters emphasized the connections between US race relations and the decolonizing Third World with slogans such as "Don't Preach Freedom Abroad and Apartheid at Home," "You Can't Buy Africa, Latin America, and Asia," and "Stop Genocide in America and South Africa" ("Give" 1963). Such claims of "apartheid" and "genocide" were deliberately provocative, and they speak to the limited range of critique available in the United States, even after the civil



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rights successes of the 1950s. While King could lament the promise of an American Dream as yet unfulfilled, black expatriates in Ghana, many of whom had left the United States precisely because King's brand of nonviolence seemed anemic to them, could question the very terms of his approach to civil rights reform.

Although others had originally conceived a protest in Accra to coincide with the March on Washington, the event's organizational center was the African American writer and intellectual Julian Mayfield, who had begun his arts career in the late 1940s acting, directing, and writing plays in New York and was a well-known novelist and activist by the time he moved to Ghana in 1961. Mayfield, along with fellow expatriates Maya Angelou, W. Alphaeus Hunton, and two others, presented a petition to the US Embassy that, as historian Kevin Gaines puts it, "blasted Kennedy for the shortfall between his administration's rhetoric on African American civil rights and African freedom and its tacit support for the status quo both at home and on the African continent" (2006, 171).<sup>1</sup> This action, appropriately theatrical for someone who began his adult life on the stage, was a highpoint in a journey that had taken Mayfield from a civil rights activist and leading light of both the Harlem Writers Guild and the black theater scene in the early 1950s, to a novelist and journalist based in Puerto Rico in the mid-1950s, to an increasingly radical intellectual who by 1960 had traveled to revolutionary Cuba and run guns for Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader internationally famous for engaging in armed battles against white supremacists in North Carolina. During those years, Mayfield later wrote, "life became intolerable in the United States for active dissenters from the Martin Luther King philosophy. The people who run most of the news media had decided that only the King voice was legitimate" ("Tales"). Mayfield escaped the valorization of King by moving to Ghana, where he enjoyed regular contact with "radical" luminaries such as Nkrumah and W. E. B. Du Bois (who, in a poignant coincidence, died in Accra the day before the march on the embassy). Although he has remained largely absent from black literary histories, Julian Mayfield was a prolific figure connected to a number of important moments for postwar civil rights reform, and his still under-explored writing opens a window on those literatures that engage questions of race and rights in ways markedly—and purposively—distinct from the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, and as such has not been recognized as "civil rights literatures" at all.<sup>2</sup>



In suggesting that we conceptualize Mayfield's life and work in the context of civil rights, this essay participates in rethinking how we understand both the "Civil Rights Movement" and "civil rights literature." Cultural historians such as Robin D. G. Kelley (1996), Penial Joseph (2000), Nikhil Pal Singh (2004), and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) have stressed the historical and political problems associated with collapsing the short Civil Rights Movement (1954–1965)—sometimes called the King Years, the Heroic Years, or the "classical" phase—with the variety and complexity of the Long Civil Rights Movement, a figuration that acknowledges civil rights energies from the New Deal era of the 1930s to the ascendancy of Black Power thinking in the 1970s. As Singh observes, the King-centered "account of the civil rights era has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America" (2004, 5) that tends to ignore persisting economic inequality. Hall concurs, noting of highly visible Civil Rights Movement spectacles: "If the continuing story of school desegregation has been obscured by a narrative of post-1965 declension, the struggle for economic justice has been erased altogether" (2005, 1258). According to Joseph, the "historical and political narrative of the 'movement'" centered on the "Heroic" period "obscures and effaces as much as it reveals and illuminates," and thus "relocating the black political radicalism that has been chronologically situated during the late 1960s in an earlier political landscape dominated by the southern movement's struggles against Jim Crow reperiodizes civil rights and Black Power historiography by underscoring the fluidity of two historical time periods too often characterized as mutually exclusive" (2000, 7). For Joseph, the 1950s roots of black radicalism have been too facilely distilled into what he describes as a "series of clichés and false binaries that completely ignore the international dimension of black thought[:] . . . 'Violence versus nonviolence,' 'Martin versus Malcolm,' and 'Separatism versus Integration'" (8). Like the other historians mentioned above, Joseph challenges histories that uncritically reproduce the Heroic narrative by ignoring the civil rights contributions of black and white radicals in the Marxist tradition, work that has also been undertaken in literary studies by scholars such as Alan Wald, Cheryl Higashida, Jodi Melamed, and Mary Helen Washington, who have made great strides in recovering the work of black radical literary writers.<sup>3</sup> As Joseph writes, "Locating the roots of late-1960s black radicalism within the internationalism of the black left of the late 1950s constitutes what



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I describe as an 'alternative narrative' or history that challenges the 'silencing' that permeates all sites of historical production." Elaborating another dimension of this idea, Melamed theorizes "race radicalism," which she defines as "antiracist thinking, struggle, and politics that reckon precisely with those aspects of racialization that official liberal antiracisms screen off: the differential and racialized violences that inevitably follow from the insufficiency and nongeneralizability of human value under US-led transnational capitalism and neoliberal globalization. Race radicalisms are materialist antiracisms that prioritize the unevennesses of global capitalism as primary race matters" (2011, 47).

Following Joseph's call for an "alternative narrative" to the Civil Rights Movement, this essay explores in more detail an "alternative" archive of civil rights literature that has affinities with "race radicalism," especially in its refusal of what Melamed calls the "injunction to take US ascendancy for granted and to stay blind to global capitalism as a racial-political matter" (10). Such an archive takes shape against a background of "civil rights literature" as it is most often described, a category naming texts about marches, protests, or boycotts, or about the dehumanizing effects of legalized segregation and white supremacist violence.<sup>4</sup> That "standard" civil rights literature includes novels such as Douglas Kiker's *The Southerner* (1957) and Carson McCullers's *Clock without Hands* (1961) (about federal mandates to integrate public schools); John O. Killens's *Sippi* (1967), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and James Forman's *Freedom's Blood* (1979) (about characters who become involved in protests connected to the organized Movement); and more contemporary works reimagining key figures or seminal events of the era, such as Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993) (about Emmett Till's 1955 murder), Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* (1998) (about King), and Anthony Grooms's *Bombingham* (2001) (about the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham). Recognizable as "civil rights literature," these and similar works concern the King-centered movement or historical events that catalyzed this movement; they are set in the American South, focus on segregation and its attendant evils, and posit civil rights change in terms of federal mandates for legal equality and achieving a general consensus among Americans that enacting racial equality is but a matter of moral choice (the *To Kill a Mockingbird* school of civil rights reform).

In comparison, Mayfield's work may not seem to be participating in the discourse of "civil rights" at all, and, set not in the American South but



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in the North and on the international stage via Accra, his work certainly does not conform to the “Heroic Years” model. But he is nonetheless always interested in the intersections of race, class, and Cold War politics, and, ranging beyond the “clichéd” civil rights narrative Joseph describes, his works contribute to an “alternative civil rights literature.” Precisely because his writing operates outside familiar frameworks for conceptualizing what counts as civil rights literature, though, Mayfield’s writing draws attention to aspects of the US and global color line obscured in work invested in the progressive narrative of civil rights reform. It does this in six interrelated ways: 1) remaining skeptical that integration will meaningfully redress the systemic entrenchment of US racism given the pervasiveness of “racial capitalism”; 2) challenging the dominant voices in black leadership on matters such as violent resistance; 3) recurrently criticizing US hegemony, both in terms of “racial capitalism” and in what Nkrumah called the “neocolonialist” cast to US foreign relations; 4) insisting that US race relations always be contextualized in terms of European colonial history and US neocolonial power; 5) emphasizing black history as both a recuperative source for civil rights and as a way to mark and celebrate black difference; and 6) particularly in fiction, exploring the subtle ways that “race” circulates in US and global cultures.<sup>5</sup>

In its rebuke of the King-centered narrative, then, Mayfield’s work amounts to a contestation of the way that “civil rights,” “civil rights literature,” and even the notion of “integration” have been reified in those accounts that limit the scope of civil rights to the organized Movement’s most visible features and preoccupations.<sup>6</sup> I am not claiming that such a critique is exclusive to Mayfield’s writing but rather that attending to it opens one to a range of “alternative civil rights literatures” in the 1950s and 1960s that share a like-minded sensibility, including work by Ann Petry, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Du Bois. These and other writers produced work in the 1950s and after not primarily set in the South or concerned with documenting the evils and ironies of segregation but focused instead on the importance of black history and of an internationalist view for contextualizing the civil rights struggle, and on exploring the more complex ways that “race” had meaning in the postwar United States. Such focus provides a powerful framework for imagining racial liberation, a framework that has remained largely invisible to discussions of civil rights literatures.



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## Fusing art and politics: a biographical sketch

Born in South Carolina in 1928, by the early 1950s Mayfield was already a successful actor, having appeared in numerous theater productions, most notably the musical *Lost in the Stars*, an adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Alan Paton's fictional exploration of South African racial discord. During that time, Mayfield also began writing his own work, from the one-act plays *A World Full of Men* and *The Other Foot*, produced in 1952, to longer plays, *Fire* and *417*, also produced off Broadway, the latter serving as the basis for his first novel, *The Hit* (1957). In those years Mayfield coedited *Freedom*, a newspaper founded by Paul Robeson, worked with the Council for African Affairs, acted in a revival of John Wexley's play *They Shall Not Die* (about the Scottsboro Boys), and became an active member of the Harlem Writers Guild, a group that included such important writers as Killens, Angelou, Childress, and John Henrik Clarke, among many others (see Scarupa 1979). He also produced civil rights-minded drama such as Ossie Davis's first play, *Alice in Wonder* (1951), directed Davis's *Big Deal* (1953), and arranged for the young Lorraine Hansberry to write a script for a fundraiser for Robeson. In 1954, Mayfield married physician Ana Livia Cordero, and the couple moved to her native Puerto Rico, where he was a regular columnist for the *Puerto Rico World Journal* and also wrote his first two novels, *The Hit* and *The Long Night* (1958), both of which were published to general acclaim in the States. In 1959, the Mayfields returned to New York, where he became increasingly active in both domestic civil rights activism and the black literary scene; early that year he was a key participant in "The First Conference of Negro Writers," sponsored by the American Society of African Culture. In the summer of 1960 he traveled to Cuba at the invitation of the revolutionary government, where he met Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader who had become notorious for meeting white supremacist terror with armed resistance in Monroe, North Carolina. By December of that year, Mayfield would think enough of Williams's brand of militant leadership that he and historian John Henrik Clarke delivered machine guns and other material to aid in what he described as the "race war in Monroe, North Carolina, where I had seen white men and black men taking pot shots at each other every evening" (Mayfield 1963a, 181).<sup>7</sup>

In 1961, increasingly disillusioned with US racial politics (and a person of interest to the FBI), Mayfield moved to Ghana, where Cordero administered a health clinic and would become personal physician to the



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elderly Du Bois, who had been living in Accra since October of that year. While in Ghana, Mayfield became more active in politics, writing speeches for Nkrumah, editing *The World without the Bomb*, papers from an international summit held in Accra aimed at achieving world peace in the atomic age, and founding the *African Review*, among other activities. During this period, he became more vocal in his criticisms of the US government and its relationship with the Third World. In 1966, mere weeks before President Nkrumah was overthrown in a coup d'état, Mayfield moved to Spain, where he finished an unpublished novel, "Death at Karamu," and then back to the States, where he co-wrote and starred in the film *Uptight* (1968), set in the days after King's assassination and focusing on black radicals planning armed revolution in Cleveland. In 1971, Mayfield's life took another unexpected turn after he moved to Guyana and accepted the post of special adviser to the Ministry of Information in Prime Minister Forbes Burnham's government. Having split with Cordero, Mayfield married Joan Cambridge, a Guyanese writer, and remained in Guyana for several years, intermittently working on a biography of Burnham that never came to fruition. By the late 1970s, back in the States once again, Mayfield had a reputation as an international black radical and writer adept at "fusing art and politics," as a 1975 *Washington Post* profile put it (West 1975, B1). Despite his relative notoriety, Mayfield's efforts to publish his many (still) unpublished works were at least partly hampered by his political activism, and his later life was increasingly consumed by teaching. Plagued by debt, in the late 1970s and early 1980s he tried his hand at writing best sellers while teaching at Cornell, the University of Maryland, and Howard University, where he was writer-in-residence in the late 1970s. With various writing projects still in the works, Mayfield suffered a heart attack and died in 1984, aged 56.<sup>8</sup>

As this sketch attests, Mayfield led an extraordinary literary and political life, and its full importance remains woefully underexplored. Here, I consider his literary output in some depth in an attempt to suggest the six ways such work helps establish an alternative to the Heroic civil rights narrative, pointing to a rethinking of how literature might intervene in the realm of civil rights. After exploring Mayfield's three published novels, I look at some of his shorter and unpublished work from the 1960s and 1970s that suggests how his thinking on civil rights was changed by his disillusionment with the King narrative and his subsequent move to Ghana.



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## Acquisition for the sake of acquisition

Mayfield's first published novel, *The Hit*, expands a one-act play, 417, which he wrote in the mid-1950s.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to works set on the front lines of the organized Movement, *The Hit* takes place in Harlem, and rather than explore legal restrictions such as voting disenfranchisement or daily existence in a Jim Crow environment, it focuses on northern "racial capitalism," representing how a desire to integrate into American fantasies of capitalist acquisition actually serves to obliterate the possibility of black autonomy and self-definition. If *The Hit* is a "civil rights" novel, then, it operates in the field of "race radicalism" as described by Melamed, insisting on "global capitalism as a racial-political matter" (2011, 10), as a threat less of whites oppressing blacks than of blacks oppressing themselves by assuming the primacy of capitalism and capitulating to its values and mandates.

In the novel, Hubert Cooley is a self-described "slave" indentured as a building superintendent for tenements on 126th Street. A failed businessman, Hubert barely scrapes by financially, and is defined by an all-encompassing "dream" to hit the local numbers game and win enough money to leave his wife, flee New York, and start a new business in California. For black people in Harlem, the novel suggests, the numbers game represents both a perversion and the purest expression of a capitalist system that produces inequalities that one can never transcend—even though the game is prompted by that very fantasy of escape. Hubert's compulsive gambling is driven by his "dream" of being upwardly mobile, a "solid and persistent" (1988, 69) dimension of the American experience.

*The Hit's* plot illustrates a diagnosis offered by Mayfield's friend Lorraine Hansberry in 1959. She decries "the villainous and often ridiculous money values that spill over from dominant culture and often make us ludicrous in pursuit of that which has its own inherently ludicrous nature: acquisition for the sake of acquisition. The desire for the possession of 'things' has rapidly replaced among too many of us the impulse for the possession of ourselves, for freedom" (1981, 8–9).<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the same black radical tradition as *The Hit*, Hansberry's argument helps us see how Hubert's "desire for things" has eclipsed his impulse to possess himself, a problem compounded by the fact that although the capitalist economy purports to be racially objective, it in fact conflates whiteness with value, and so the system is always "rigged" against him. Rather than dwell on Hubert's racial difference from white culture—as would be required in a work set in the Jim Crow South—Mayfield thus emphasizes how Hubert



identifies with capitalism: "He had heard it said that buying and selling were the life's blood of the nation. He believed in law and order—he had taken no part in either one of the two Harlem riots where people broke windows and looted stores. He believed in the system and that Woolworth and Blumstein [white business owners] had a right to keep their places in it" (1988, 79). Here blood, historically a trope for what determines racial status, is replaced by the flow of capital, the "life's blood of the nation." Hubert is willing to detach himself from identification with other blacks if it means he can succeed according to capitalist norms (illuminating why "he did not want to go to Africa or any other place where there were so many Negroes" [4]).

Hubert muses that, even without being "blessed with fairer skin," becoming rich would allow him to transcend the color line (6). In one version of his dream, Hubert has "supper in the diner of a streamliner speeding toward San Francisco. The black waiters were smiling and bowing as they set the meal before [him]" (16–17); the waiters' blackness and their "bowing" emphasizes the "whiteness" of Hubert's dream. Mayfield is finally critical of this dream not only because Hubert himself conflates capitalist success with whiteness, but also because such a fantasy actually estranges Hubert from himself. In the context of capitalist fantasies of success, for example, "a man with a Cadillac had certain sacred and divine rights" (122). Hubert here ascribes such "rights" not to all human beings but only to those fortunate enough to own a Cadillac—a biting commentary on the tendency of capitalism to attribute value without regard to even the legal system, which is held up by many standard civil rights novels as the final arbiter of who gets what rights.

## The deeper meaning of "The Race"

Mayfield's second novel, *The Long Night*, again involving the numbers game, explores a young boy's experience of the weight of black history. In the opening chapter, Frederick "Steely" Brown's mother hits her number and sends her son to collect her twenty-seven-dollar winnings. "If you lose that money, boy," she says, "don't you come back at all" (1988, 30). After Steely gets mugged by the older boys in his own youth gang, he spends the long night of the title hatching various schemes for replacing the money, ranging, in terms of capitalist norms, from the respectable (working for the local pharmacist, Mr. Litchstein) to the acceptable (borrowing it from a local pimp, Sugar Boy) to the illegal (purse-snatching and bike stealing). In the wee hours of the morning, growing increasingly



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desperate, Steely decides to roll a drunk. Picking out a suitable target passed out on a stoop, he goes through the man's pockets until in a Dickensian coincidence the man is revealed to be Steely's long-lost father, an alcoholic intellectual who had abandoned the family some time before. In this final twist, the novel unites two thematic strands: Steely's efforts to rustle money in a hard-scrabble environment and the gaping hole left by his father, who stands for a certain kind of black radical always preoccupied with "The Race."

Steely's father, Paul Brown, in fact illustrates how Mayfield moves from a realist account of hard times in Harlem in *The Hit*, to an account of such hard times informed by black history in *The Long Night*. Where in *The Hit* Hubert naively believes race can be transcended through the accumulation of capital, in *The Long Night* Paul tells his wife, "Don't you know that money makes you unhappy?" (1988, 23–24). He thus focuses on attaining more education because "the race needed lawyers" (26), so that, in contrast to *The Hit*, this novel is centrally concerned with the study of "The Race." Like numerous novels from this period—including, to take one example, Ann Petry's *The Narrows* (1953), in which the protagonist feels as though "he were carrying The Race around with him all the time" (1988, 138)—*The Long Night* demonstrates that an important dimension of civil rights literatures is a connection to "The Race," a sense of blackness issuing from a shared history and its attendant feeling of collectivity, a counterpoint to Hubert's integrationist fantasy in which his blackness would be evacuated if he only had enough money.

From an early age, Paul has inculcated in Steely a connection to black history, and indeed in the opening pages we learn that he is named after Frederick Douglass, one among a pantheon of black heroes that includes "Toussaint L'Ouverture, a black Haitian who had revolted against Napoleon and liberated his people from slavery" (16). If Steely learns about white heroes by consuming pop culture like comic books and television shows, his father must make a conscious effort to school him on figures who embody the black radical tradition, such as L'Ouverture and Douglass (he also stresses the importance of contemporary black role models such as Jackie Robinson, whom Paul takes Steely to see at Ebbets Field). In this way, Steely learns that the meaning of "blackness" inheres not merely in the color of one's skin but rather in an identification with "The Race," the most visible examples of which are both the people in his community in Harlem and those historical figures uncompromising in their critique of, and resistance to, white oppression and European colonial power.



*The Long Night* is invested not only in calling attention to the existence of black radicalism but also in exploring how contemporary black characters deal or don't deal with such cultural and historical legacies. For all his high-minded rhetoric about leading the race, Paul manages only to talk, drink too much, flunk out of law school, and abandon his family. When Steely considers the distance between his father's actions and his uplifting discourse about "The Race," he thinks: "Now, for the first time, he began to see contradictions between what people say and what they do" (88). An important episode in this regard occurs when Steely overhears his father's late night, drunken debate about "The Race" carried on with a law school classmate while Steely is supposed to be in bed. This discussion makes Steely feel himself to be "in the very core of an exciting movement, for he was a Negro and his father was a Negro and it seemed that Negroes were the most important people in the world" (74). Such an inversion of white norms is possible only because Paul has encouraged his son to see himself as empowered, and to see black history as something worthy of study: the "movement" in which Steely finds himself has little to do with the dominant Civil Rights Movement discussed above, and everything to do with creating a context in which a boy like Steely might believe he is capable of becoming Jackie Robinson or Jack Johnson or Superman. Steely can only dimly understand the "movement" as an awareness of black history and one's intellectual and emotional relationship to this history, and Paul himself can hardly embody that tradition in the microcosm of his own family.

Despite the Jackie Robinsons of history, Steely hears his father complain, "We've been getting our freedom in drips and drabs. . . . They've made us toe the line by dangling the great American dream in front of our noses. 'Just be a good boy,' they say, 'and don't cause too much trouble and we'll treat you a little more like a human being'" (75). For Hubert Cooley, the "dream" is desirable, if unachievable; for Paul Brown the dream itself is a sham, part of an elaborate power play that always forces black people into the position of asking for human recognition rather than enjoying it as a universal right. This is the problem that Steely learns to recognize as he "lay awake trying to digest the meaning of all he had heard. Always there were new ideas or new ways of looking at old ideas. He had no way of understanding the literal meaning of the words; he felt, rather than comprehended" (76). Steely's experience as a member of "The Race," even if he cannot understand it rationally or articulate it verbally, is in fact a central point of *The Long Night* and a feature of alternative civil rights literatures more generally: the works



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help us understand race and racial arguments in a non-“literal” way, so Paul’s complaint that his “freedom” has been denied is itself less important than Steely’s desire to experience the deeper meaning of things, to claim his own knowledge of the complex ways of the world, a desire linking *The Long Night* to the best-known African American novel of the 1950s, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the narrator “learn[s] to look beneath the surface” (1980, 153).<sup>11</sup>

Such *sub rosa* identification with “The Race” is emphasized again in *The Long Night*’s conclusion when, reunited with Steely, Paul contextualizes their father-son bond: “You remember what I told you about Toussaint and Fred Douglass and all those great black men who lived before you and I were born? Well, you’ve got to believe in them . . . even if you stop believing in me. . . . Because, you see, you’re right. I did give in . . . under pressure, I gave in. . . . I just folded up because I wasn’t strong enough” (Mayfield 1988, 152). If for Paul awareness of black history can outweigh even familial bonds, this awareness involves not only domestic history, as in *The Hit*, but also the legacies of colonialism, illustrated partly through the presence of a character called Black Papa. Black Papa haunts the streets of Harlem chanting an unintelligible song: “*Cina, cina, cina, / Dogwé sang, cina lo-gé,*” and Steely’s friends taunt him with a counter-rhyme: “*Black Papa, Black Papa, / Can’t talk propuh, can’t talk propuh*” (36). While Steely thinks more about Black Papa, he remembers that his father had once explained to him that “Black Papa had been a Haitian seaman who found himself stranded in New York,” and because Steely’s historical awareness extends to figures like Toussaint, he “reasoned that if Black Papa were Haitian, he was one of Toussaint’s people. He wondered if the great liberator could have looked like this little old man with the pushcart. He tried to picture Black Papa in stately dignity, his arms folded across his chest, epaulets on his shoulders, commanding an army against Napoleon. He did this frequently, but he could never really imagine Black Papa as Toussaint” (37). Late in the novel, however, when Steely once again hears Black Papa’s song, the meaning of blackness for him has changed: Black Papa’s “black skin showed ashen, and his eyes seemed darker and deeper than they had by daytime” and although the chant was “only a simple prayer, Steely’s father had told him, a prayer to a Haitian sea god,” now “the very strangeness of the sound stirred the boy’s imagination” (116). An affective gesture that sets him apart from the boys who mock Black Papa, Steely’s imaginative connection to him depends on his knowledge both of Black Papa’s



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origins and of just the broadest outlines of Haitian history, an awareness highlighted by *The Long Night's* epigraph, drawn from the same "Voudoun prayer to the Haitian sea god Agwé" as Black Papa's. Black Papa's presence in the novel thus suggests a kind of postcolonial displacement, mirrored by Paul's own unraveling. A member of a new generation, Steely is the one who must learn to negotiate the legacies of black history while likewise negotiating the pitfalls of the Harlem environment if he is going to thrive where his father failed.<sup>12</sup>

In contextualizing a boy in Harlem in relation to world history, *The Long Night* reflects Mayfield's growing interest in Cold War internationalism and domestic race relations in the mid- and late-1950s. Having returned from Puerto Rico after *The Long Night* was published, Mayfield had joined the Communist Party because it seemed to him "the most powerful, radical organization" he could find, and this radicalism was evident in his participation in the "First Conference of Negro Writers," sponsored by the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) in 1959 (quoted in Washington 2014, 258). As Washington has explored in depth, this conference is an important moment in 1950s black literary history, bringing together "an embattled internationalist Left . . . determined to advance black cultural and political self-determination" with "a conservative flank . . . promoting narrow national definitions of integration and race" in the presence of "US-government sponsored spy operations . . . authorized to monitor and contain black radicalism" (241). Associated with the "embattled internationalist Left," Mayfield criticized those black writers and ordinary citizens who were eager to integrate into the white mainstream.

The published version of Mayfield's AMSAC speech has become his best-known essay, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," and it clarifies his aims both in his previous work and in his next novel, *The Grand Parade* (1961). Referring to the panel on "social protest" that had taken place at the AMSAC conference, Mayfield writes:

Many of the speakers felt that social protest as we have known it has outlived its usefulness. They knew, of course, that racial injustice still flourishes in our national life, but they felt that the moral climate has been established for the eventual breakdown of racism, and that they need not therefore employ their literary tools to attack it in the same old way, that is to say, directly and violently. To this participant it seemed that the younger writer was seeking a new way of defining himself. (1960, 30)



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This struggle for self-definition, Mayfield goes on to explain, is especially acute as black writers strive to produce “mainstream” writing; that is, writing that is not “merely” social protest. For Mayfield, this desire for “mainstream” recognition parallels the push for legal integration, raising the danger that black literary difference might be obliterated. If “integration,” he writes, means “the attainment of full citizenship rights in such areas as voting, housing, education, employment, and the like,” then it is, of course, desirable. “But if, as the writers have reason to suspect, integration means completely identifying the Negro with the American image—that great-power face that the world knows and the Negro knows better—then the writer must not be judged too harshly for balking at the prospect.” Indeed, Mayfield will go on to argue that the black writer ought not to aim to seamlessly integrate into the white American Dream—as Hubert Cooley does in *The Hit*—but rather to offer a critique of the dream itself: “For him the facade of the American way of life is always transparent. He sings the national anthem *sotto voce* and has trouble reconciling the ‘dream’ to the reality he knows” (33).<sup>13</sup> As James Smethurst has observed, this essay “remarkably anticipates the position of many revolutionary nationalists a few years later in [Mayfield’s] insistence on black democratic rights while rejecting what he sees as the imperialist stance of the United States” (2005, 121). And it is indeed the distance between the facade of the American way and its deeper realities that preoccupies his final published novel, *The Grand Parade* (1961).

## Integrating the first great rulers of the earth

Where *The Long Night* enlarges *The Hit*’s focus on the difficulties of life in Harlem by contextualizing those difficulties in relation to black history, *The Grand Parade* considers how that history is enmeshed with politics, questioning the centrality of charismatic leaders in the highly visible civil rights struggle for school integration. In this novel, Mayfield focuses on the complicated politics of the fictional city Gainesboro, in a border state very much like Maryland, as it attempts to enact federal law mandating school integration. Of its large cast of characters, two of the most prominent are Douglas Taylor, the city’s white mayor, and Randolph Banks, a black city councilman, who seems at first a model of heroic black leadership. Both play an important role in the growing protest against school integration, and although they seem to have very similar backgrounds, “the resemblance was superficial” (Mayfield 1963b,



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88). Throughout the novel, “race” is connected to both politics and history. Politically, race motivates the effort to integrate the school and spurs the novel’s more traditional civil rights plot; historically, race informs the “well-spring of experience” emerging from the larger history that in *The Long Night* Paul Brown wants so desperately to inculcate in his son, a history that makes Randolph’s “status and identity” (1988, 88) vexed while Douglas’s seems secure. Indeed, in *The Grand Parade*, as well as in Mayfield’s later, unpublished novels and his many published nonfiction essays, the signal concern is with how global black history informs the current civil rights climate in the United States. As Mayfield’s first novel to tackle civil rights in terms similar to works like Kiker’s *The Southerner* or Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Grand Parade* still stands apart from them by means of two interrelated arguments: first, that contemporary civil rights action can only be understood through black history; and, second, that in light of such an understanding it is naive to think that meaningful civil rights reform will be enacted solely through the efforts of what literary critic Robert Patterson calls “messianic leadership,” the widespread civic myth that “places the responsibility for the Herculean task of securing the group’s civil rights on one person” (2013, 4). Instead, *The Grand Parade* suggests that to yield real-world civil rights change, attention must be shifted from the heroic actions of individual politicians or civil rights leaders to the enmeshing of money, history, and politics.

In setting his most obvious civil rights novel not in the oppressive, violent South but in a border state, Mayfield explores what happens in a city where the plan to implement federal mandates of school integration seems merely pro forma: “School segregation in Gainesboro was an anachronism. . . . Even without the Supreme Court decision outlawing it, it would have crumbled soon under its own weight” (1963b, 69). Despite this conventional wisdom, a newspaper advertisement appears proclaiming integration as “The Greatest Threat to the American Way of Life” (68), the handiwork of Clarke Bryant, former sociology professor from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who has come to Gainesboro to found a White Protection Council. Through this incitement *The Grand Parade* explores in detail Mayfield’s remark in “Into the Mainstream and Oblivion” that “the facade of the American way of life is always transparent.”

For all the dealings and double-dealings that make up the political scene in Gainesboro, the fight over integration is predicated on white ignorance of black history. Noteworthy is not simply the fact of Bryant’s opposition to integration but also his particular arguments, which depend



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on a kind of rationality that makes sense only from a certain historical point of view. When, for example, Bryant calls on Rosalia Stanley, a wealthy white civic leader who “believed, vaguely, that all men are created equal” (1963b, 148), he aims to convince her that segregation is “rational” because history has demonstrated black people are culturally inferior to whites. “They want Negro equality,” Bryant explains, “although no Negro ever has anywhere, so far as I have been able to learn, developed a state of culture approaching civilization. . . . These race levelers want to combine a people who are hardly out of the trees with Caucasians who have contributed to the world the finest, most advanced civilization in human history” (138). Of course, his phrase “so far as I have been able to learn” points to Bryant’s severely limited sense of world history. When Rosalia ventures that there are “black nations” (150), Bryant replies, “Of course, there are Liberia and Haiti. . . . Liberia, probably the most backward country on earth after a hundred years of independence. And Haiti, a prosperous nation until the blacks slaughtered all the whites” (151). Eventually, such examples convince Rosalia that black people are inherently inferior, unworthy of equality. Bryant elaborates: “The Negro has never produced any meaningful civilization anywhere at any time in the entire history of mankind. . . . I’m a racist, yes, but not in the way you think. I don’t preach violence. No thinking Southerner does. And I *do* believe in equality of opportunity, the right of every person to better himself. But I do not believe all men are created equal. History definitely proves that all races were not created equal.” At this point, the omniscient narrator intervenes:

Rosalia would have been astonished, and Bryant would never have believed, that the first great rulers of the earth, so far as scholars could determine, were neither white nor yellow, but black men who controlled empires from the valley of the Ganges, the banks of the Euphrates, and the Nile Rivers. From her studies, the motion pictures, and dozens of novels, she had come by the vague notions of the Roman and Greek empires, but she had never heard of the great black kingdoms of Ghana and Mali, of the Mossi and the Songhay empires, nor of their kings and emperors who ruled by laws in systems as complex and enduring as those of the better-known Gauls, Huns, Saxons, and Jutes. (151–52)



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Offered by the narrator and backed by the authority of “scholars,” this historical account seems dependable in a way that Bryant’s obviously racist version is not, and readers are thus taught something about history even as Rosalia herself never is.<sup>14</sup> As Lawrence Jackson points out, in 1961 this “information in and of itself was toxic to the ‘colored’ water fountain sign, the back-of-the-bus tradition. The epistemological revision was also reforming some of the assumptions behind the longed-for value of interracial collaboration” (2011, 458–59). Understanding such “epistemological revision” indeed illuminates how *The Grand Parade* handles the Movement. The narrator tells us:

Those who write history tend to place themselves, or men much like themselves, of the same complexion, texture of hair, and spread of nose, at the center of the universe. . . . Thus, Rosalia could not be expected to know that the “Dark Continent” was a figment of the imaginations of white historians to justify the devastation of the African slave trade, which laid waste black civilizations and rang down a curtain of colonial darkness over proud and ancient cultures. (Mayfield 1963b, 152)

It is the general American failure to even recognize the existence of black history that, as Mayfield argued in “Into the Mainstream and Oblivion,” motivated black Americans to see experience beyond what he called “the narrow national orbit—artistic, cultural and political—and [to soar] into the space of more universal experience” (1960, 32). As he wrote in 1963, “It is this total erasure of the past, of a sense of having ever belonged to anybody, that perhaps accounts for the bitterness, the frustration, and the pain of my generation, which now seeks, often too uncritically, an identification with the spirit of black nationalism sweeping the African continent” (1963a, 179). To help redress this cultural and historical erasure, *The Grand Parade* attends to the general histories of ancient Ghana and Egypt mentioned above but also to particular texts and figures central to a black radical intellectual history.

The closest thing *The Grand Parade* has to a messianic black leader is a character introduced late in the novel, Dr. Harold Bishop, the lone black person on the school board. As the board debates whether to enact federal mandates to school integration amid the protest from white citizens fomented by Bryant, Bishop emerges as a voice of conscience, a voice explicitly tied to black radicalism, thinking as he does about how



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Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* has inspired him to abandon a desire for personal gain in favor of helping "The Race." By highlighting Bishop's connection to Du Bois and a black radical intellectual history (Du Bois is an exemplar of black radicalism in Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*), Mayfield both stresses the importance of black history and complicates the messianic model of civil rights leadership. Bishop is instrumental in finally pushing through school integration in Gainesboro, but his contribution can only be understood as the fruits of a black radical tradition and its potential influence on back-channel politics. Far from ascribing superhuman powers to a handful of heroic people who might transcend the social and cultural mores of the day, *The Grand Parade* traces a line from Du Bois to Bishop precisely to draw attention to the shallowness of politicians who take up civil rights because it is fashionable, as is the case with those who campaign on change; "Every other word out of his mouth was equal rights this, equal rights that," sneers one character about an opportunist politician (15). For Bishop, a problem with many black leaders in the United States, especially in comparison with leaders in other countries, is that they are all talk and no action: "They talked loudly of fighting for freedom and liberty, but they were careful never to do anything that might jeopardize their jobs and their ranch-style houses. Everybody wanted freedom, but few of the leaders were willing to sacrifice for it. Thus the movement of the black American crawled along at a snail's pace while the rest of the colored people of the world seemed to be speeding toward their objectives" (228). As in Mayfield's other novels, here capitalism, committed to "acquisition for the sake of acquisition," impedes meaningful civil rights change, a dynamic calling into question the dominant civil rights narrative that envisions general progress only within the frame of the capitalist American Dream. And though ultimately the school is integrated, thanks to Mayor Douglas's leading the children to class, readers know that this seemingly heroic action is the result not of Douglas's pure heart but of his need to shore himself up against scandal, and to better position himself for a run for higher office.

## Love and death in Songhay

It was a similar view of civil rights change in the "King years," Mayfield explains, that prompted his move to Ghana in 1961. In his unpublished "Tales of the Lido," he describes the only time he met Martin Luther King Jr. in person, at a gathering at Harry Belafonte's apartment in New York. Mayfield asks King if he *really* believes that nonviolence will lead



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to appreciable change, and when King affirms that belief, Mayfield finds this response naive and unnecessarily conciliatory. "The reason I mention Dr. King," Mayfield writes, "is that he was indirectly responsible for a lot of us turning up in Africa. . . . If you were not on the King bandwagon in the early sixties, it was best to get the hell out" ("Tales").

In Ghana, Mayfield became increasingly active in politics, in the ways mentioned above, and wrote a thrice-weekly column in the *Evening News*, the ruling Convention People's Party newspaper, among other journalistic endeavors (see Mayfield 1963a, 197). Although his journalism and political activities took precedence over his literary production in these years, some surviving manuscripts point to how Mayfield was conceptualizing international civil rights in his fiction and drama after leaving the States. In work written during and after his time in Ghana, Mayfield habitually sets the action in Songhay, "a new country with an old African name," very much like post-independence Ghana ("Fount"). Songhay's president, a figure reminiscent of Nkrumah, struggles to modernize the nation while contending with competing political pressures—from local tribalism to the influences of the Americans, Russians, and Chinese. In "Death at Karamu," an unpublished novel that Mayfield completed around the time he moved from Ghana in 1966, a murder plot is set against the backdrop of post-independence Songhay, where, as one character puts it, there is "need for Songhay to keep her doors open to both East and West without falling into the pocket of either" ("Death"). Borrowing some plot elements from "Death at Karamu," his play "Fount of the Nation" centers on "the president of a newly independent African nation [who] battles to preserve the spirit of freedom and the integrity of his people while struggling with internal plots and external pressures" ("Playbill"). As he works to build a deep-water harbor for his country, the president faces opposition from everyone from local businessmen to the CIA, and negotiations become so complex that at one point he compares his ship of state to a "little black canoe" "shooting the rapids trying to avoid the rocks, which all have names . . . Americans, Chinese, Russians, the damn British" ("Fount"). In Mayfield's view, then, Songhay's autonomy is compromised by Cold War power struggles, even as the United States claims to support the rights of all peoples, whether foreign or domestic.

Songhay's fraught relationship with the United States is also the theme of an important short story Mayfield published in 1972, "Black on Black: A Political Love Story." Narrated by an African American expatriate in Songhay whose résumé is cribbed from Mayfield's ("In Songhay," the narrator explains, "I was the editor of a magazine; back in the States I had



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written a couple of books, been an actor, and had directed a play or two" [1972, 58]), the story charts the tempestuous relationship between Nana Matusi IV, a "progressive chief" in Songhay, and Bessie Bates, a headstrong African American singer who has recently immigrated to West Africa. The difficulties of their relationship are informed by the conflicting ideological demands being made on contemporary Songhians. Described as an honest chief who genuinely cares about improving the country, Nana insists on doing things the "African way," which he contrasts to the influence of "European and American values": "Everything good in African life is being sacrificed on the altar of European and American values. . . . Social discipline has broken down. Boys and girls are being *thrust* into adulthood without a knowledge of their past, something unimaginable a generation ago" (62). Through Nana, Mayfield explores the circulation of American ideology beyond the geographic confines of the United States, and what this means for a more capacious sense of "civil rights" in a black-run nation such as Songhay/Ghana.

The central symbolic moment of "Black on Black" comes with a protest against the US Embassy that echoes the real-life protest discussed at the beginning of this essay. It commences with an eloquent speech about "400 years of European and American devilry, oppression and racism, culminating in their current attempt to overthrow the present free government of Songhay" (64). Stirred by this indictment, the heated crowd overruns the embassy barriers and tries to burn the American flag—but an African American staff member at the embassy emerges, snatches the flag, "and walk[s] back . . . almost with a goose step, the Stars and Stripes clasped to his chest as if it were a precious infant." The crowd is startled by the sight of a black man rebuking their criticisms and who in fact seems to embody "American devilry," a phenomenon that speaks to the shifting perspective on civil rights on the international, neocolonial stage. Framing "race" in terms of whiteness and blackness is insufficient for understanding the various internal and external pressures in a nation like Songhay, where ideology comes to trump race as the marker of difference; the day after the embassy protest, the government newspaper warns: "BEWARE THOSE AMERICAN NEGROES" (65). In this way, civil rights progress in West Africa involves recognizing how black Americans abroad have been put in the service of US ideology even as they are still subject to an array of *de jure* and *de facto* discriminations back home. From an international perspective, racial progress in the United States—symbolized by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the



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Voting Rights Act of 1965—is thus exposed as compromised not only by the inequalities, economic and otherwise, that persist in the States but also by Cold War mandates that all but forced countries like Songhay to align with either the US or Soviet sphere of influence. As Mayfield put it in the mid-1960s, “The American who rants about ‘the free world,’ ‘the rights of man’ and ‘the liberty of the individual’ knows in his teeth that he is lying. . . . [Americans] are the world’s greatest carriers of the neo-colonialist mentality” (1965, 11).<sup>15</sup>

I’ve argued that in Mayfield’s work we see how civil rights literatures might depart from the King-centered narrative by exploring instead how racial subjugation has been inherent in capitalist exploitation and by bringing to bear an international perspective on race—thus raising questions about the degree to which legal civil rights reform in the States amounted to meaningful change. In this regard, we might read Mayfield’s work in conjunction with a wider range of authors in the 1950s and 1960s, including Killens, whose novel *Youngblood* (1954) unites interest in racial reform with the labor tradition, constituting as monumental a civil rights novel as his later work set during the Movement, *Sippi* (1967); Petry, whose Connecticut-set *The Narrows* (1953) provides one of the richest meditations on the meaning of race in the 1950s, offering an important context for thinking about civil rights legislation; Hansberry, whose play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is justly remembered as a paradigmatic civil rights text, but whose other work such as *Les Blancs* (written between 1960 and 1965 but staged only posthumously, in 1970) explores the international context of US civil rights reform emphasized in her activism; Childress, whose play *Trouble in Mind* (1955) illuminates how direct action like the Montgomery Bus Boycott must be paired with an understanding of how language shapes perceptions of racial difference, and whose collection *Like One of the Family* (1956) focused on the relationship between black domestic servants and their white employers, brilliantly enacts a critique of “racial capitalism”; and even late-career Du Bois, effectively marginalized by the Civil Rights Movement, whose *The Black Flame* trilogy (1957–1961), following the life of one character from Reconstruction to his death in 1956, offers a Marxist-inspired long view of civil rights reform.<sup>16</sup>

Taking its place among such work, Mayfield’s writing contributes to what I name “alternative civil rights literatures,” texts that, without conceiving of themselves solely as protest literature in the vein of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), still register what in 1979 Mayfield called



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black “confinement” (Scarupa 1979, 14). Departing from the dominant civil rights narrative centered on King’s program of nonviolence, these works nonetheless participate in the same field of action as the more familiar features of the organized Civil Rights Movement, imagining possibilities for black life and liberation uncoupled from federal mandates to desegregate or ensure voting rights. As Mayfield’s work attests, there were far greater possibilities for civil rights engagement than merely representing organized action against legalized inequality in the United States. In taking a wider, internationalist view, Mayfield exposes the dominant civil rights narrative of progress and integration into the capitalist American Dream as deeply entrenched in material inequalities and in propagandistic representations of American racial and economic equality abroad. That Mayfield himself has been so little studied by literary scholars speaks to the degree to which “civil rights literature” has been bound to a particular view of the Movement. In attending to his work, scholars of postwar literature and culture can advance the important task of conceptualizing a more elastic sense of what might count as civil rights literatures.



Steven Belletto is associate professor of English at Lafayette College. He is author of *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (2012), editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (2017), and coeditor of *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* (2012). The author of numerous articles on post-1945 American literature and culture that have appeared in journals such as *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, and *ELH*, he was from 2011 to 2016 associate editor for the journal *Contemporary Literature* and is currently editor there. He is also editor of the volume *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* (2017), for which he wrote the chapter on African American literature, and he is currently writing a literary history of the Beats to be published by Cambridge University Press.

## Notes

1. For a fuller account of the Accra protest, see Gaines 2006, 168–73.
2. Although Mayfield does occasionally appear in literary and cultural histories, it is usually in reference to his activism as an expatriate in Ghana. Kevin Gaines (2006), for example, has done extensive work on Mayfield; see also Walters 1993. For the few studies that discuss Mayfield’s fiction, see Richards 1988;



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Munby 2011, 91–98; and Washington 2014, 269–73. In his magisterial literary history of black literature and criticism, Lawrence Jackson (2011) discusses Mayfield in the context of the 1950s black arts scene, especially the Harlem Writers Guild.

3. See Wald 2014; Higashida 2013; Melamed 2011; and Washington 2014.

4. This is the case, for example, in the works discussed in the recent *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* (2015). Although its editor, Julie Buckner Armstrong, is rightly skeptical of the “dominant narrative” (Armstrong 2015b, 6) of the Civil Rights Movement and advocates for the associated need for literary scholars to resist “easy-bake narratives” (2015a, 92) such as Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), the volume nonetheless tends to engage texts that focus on the organized Movement, Jim Crow, or controversies surrounding school or housing integration, and it is less interested in the characteristics of Mayfield’s writing I discuss.

5. I invoke the term “racial capitalism” in the sense described by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who uses it “to emphasize that unfettered capitalism as well as racialism produced the Jim Crow system and to suggest similarities between the North and the South” (2005, 1243, n. 27). The term has a long and complex history within the field of African American studies; for a foundational book that explores the idea in depth, see Robinson 2000. For Nkrumah’s explanation of neocolonialism, see Nkrumah 1966.

6. For recent discussions of civil rights literature that aim to complicate our understanding of this category (but still tend to focus on work explicitly about visible Civil Rights Movement events, and as such are focused predominantly on literature set in the American South), see Metress 2008, Norman 2010, Monteith 2013, and Armstrong 2015a and 2015b.

7. See Tyson 1999, 147, 204–5. Mayfield detailed his support for Williams’s militant leadership in “Challenge to Negro Leadership” (1961a). For Mayfield’s impressions of Cuba, see “The Cuban Challenge” (1961b).

8. In addition to Tyson 1999 and Scarupa 1979, these biographical paragraphs draw on the entry “Julian Mayfield” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1984), written by Mayfield’s friend William Branch; Mayfield’s *New York Times* obituary, written by James Brooke (see Brooke 1984 and Richards 1988, v–xvii); and various materials from the Julian Mayfield Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

9. The published version of 417 is relatively accessible; see Mayfield 1955.

10. Hansberry delivered this piece for her keynote speech at the AMSAC conference in 1959.



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11. Of course, "standard" civil rights novels might also concern nonliteral learning, although to the extent their goal is to, say, help effect school integration, at a certain point they must depart from the nonliteral to advocate concrete action.
12. For another reading of *Black Papa*, see Munby 2011, 95.
13. By 1968, in a review of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, Mayfield would argue that the black experience "is integral to the American experience, not a marginal back street, and that the nation's survival may depend on how quickly it understands this and changes accordingly" (1968, 638).
14. For a discussion of how black history had been systematically suppressed by Europeans over the four hundred years leading up to the twentieth century, see Robinson 2000.
15. See also "Uncle Tom Abroad," in which Mayfield argues that the way to spot what he calls *homo Tomo americanus*—an American Uncle Tom abroad—is to observe that, though he might claim to be a "radical," he "never does or says anything that might annoy the local US Embassy" (1963c, 39).
16. This is a but a small sampling of what I call "alternative civil rights literatures." One could certainly name further examples, and other scholars have paid sustained attention to authors and texts that share affinities with this sort of work. Jodi Melamed, for example, reads Chester Himes's *The End of a Primitive* (1955) as an illustrative "example of race-radical literature" (2011, 89).

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# Queer Postmodern Practices: Sex and Narrative in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Marie Franco

In “*Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Domination, and Freedom*, Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger write that “the narration both presents and thinks about domination, most obviously in terms of sadomasochism” (2013, 88). However, as in most Pynchon criticism, their analysis shifts the focus away from sexuality and instead foregrounds countercultural politics, narrative innovation, and individual liberties. When instances of nonnormative sex do enter their analysis, Herman and Weisenburger uniformly read them as perverse manifestations of hegemonic power. Given Pynchon’s notorious interweaving of violence and “politically incorrect” sex in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the publishing of which coincided with second-wave feminism and the rise of feminist antiviolence campaigns, it is no surprise that scholars have tended to marginalize Pynchon’s controversial representations of sexuality. Even if some critics acknowledge that “Pynchon’s later work continues to espouse basically pro-feminist values,” such claims are often accompanied by a qualifying statement, rearticulating that Pynchon’s work “also contains stereotyped representations of women and the female body. . . . Particularly problematic from a feminist perspective are narratorial insinuations that female characters take a masochistic pleasure in sexual degradation” (Freer 2014, 151). While literary criticism has tended to become more sex-positive since the rise of queer theory and third-wave feminisms in the 1990s, high postmodernist novels of the 1970s remain particularly fraught among contemporary feminist scholars, who often critique postmodern novelists’ unapologetic investment in virile masculinity and exclusionary discourses.<sup>1</sup> A queerer and more sex-positive reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, can disrupt such critical understandings, refiguring the role of sex in this postmodernist classic and, thus, the significance of sexually explicit material in high postmodernism more generally.



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Previous analyses of sex in postmodern literature have frequently limited themselves to the thematic level of the text, emphasizing the relation between depictions of sexual practices and corresponding social movements often associated with countercultural politics. The few analyses of sex as a structural element in postmodernist fiction tend to critique the narratives' tendency to reify patriarchal structures through their flat characterizations of women, rendered as interchangeable plot devices or, worse, pornographic asides meant to titillate male readers. Significantly, these critical tendencies leave another line of analysis wholly unexamined: the structural interplay between representations of sexual practice and postmodernist poetics. Given Pynchon's centrality to the postmodern canon and the multitude of narrative devices at play in his encyclopedic work, the notorious sexual "deviance" in *Gravity's Rainbow* makes an interesting test case for analyzing sexuality's structural role within postmodernist novels. In using *Gravity's Rainbow* as a basis for interpreting explicit sexual practice as something more than a thematic element common to postmodernist novels, I posit that Pynchon's postmodernist narrative practices are in fact themselves reliant on his depictions of "deviant" sexual practices.

An in-depth analysis of female sexual agency in *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests that the profusion of explicit sexual scenes in postmodernist novels cannot entirely be construed as a prurient fantasy, as a playful reveling in freedom from censorship, or as merely an expression of postmodern heteroglossia that destabilizes the binary between high and low culture. This reevaluation of sexuality's function in postmodernist novels, through the test case of nonnormative, especially female sexual practices in *Gravity's Rainbow* raises central questions about previous critical assumptions: Why have we been so eager to read female characters' unapologetic promiscuity as an objectifying male fantasy? Why have we been so reluctant to acknowledge female sexual agency? Is the specter of female sexuality so frightening that it must be elided or decried as a misogynist fantasy when it's found haunting the tomes of postmodernist authors? Indeed, exploring such questions in the works of high postmodernist authors might suggest a far more capacious approach to literary categorization in which the importance of sex and sexuality refigures literary history through a pleasure in perversities, linking high and low culture, male and female authors. Furthermore, this capacious approach to post-World War II literature can destabilize the presumed heteromascularity of high postmodernism, since we might reconsider postmodernism in relation to the historically and thematically



overlapping proliferation of queer pornographies after the 1969 Stonewall Uprising—particularly those early texts that discuss “the often anarchic sense of brotherhood among S/Mers” (Preston [1991] 1993, 130).

In contrast to dominant critical trends, my argument centers the role of sexuality in *Gravity's Rainbow* by taking seriously a question posed within the novel itself, by Miklos Thanatz: “But why are we taught to feel reflexive shame whenever the subject comes up? Why will the Structure allow every other kind of sexual behavior but *that* one?” (Pynchon [1973] 2006, 751).<sup>2</sup> Thanatz’s own response to this question is telling: “Because submission and dominance are resources it needs for its very survival. They cannot be wasted in private sex. In *any* kind of sex. It needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power.” Based on this insight, Thanatz goes on to theorize “Sado-Anarchism”: “I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away.” Though widely overlooked in Pynchon criticism, this theorization of Sado-Anarchism shapes almost every iteration of explicit sexual practice in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Sadomasochism (henceforth s/m) can thus be read as the most illustrative manifestation of queer practice in the novel, an erotic and narrative practice that replicates the text’s own discursive structure through embodied sexual pleasure. By considering postmodernist poetics and queerness together, I demonstrate an as yet unacknowledged concurrence between these two (narrative) practices—namely, that postmodernist literary devices are enacted in s/m, through embodied and vocalized sexual practices. Paralleling Sado-Anarchism’s subversive impact on the State, the s/m sexual practice that permeates the novel causes the narrative to wither away; as s/m narratively disperses throughout the text, the novel’s teleology and narrative structure dissolve. While I am not suggesting that a queer reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* reveals s/m to be a consistent mode of resistance to hegemonic systems of control, I do argue that the text’s construction of s/m generates a complex intersection of lines of power.

In foregrounding s/m, a new, even hopeful, understanding of Pynchon’s seminal text emerges, one anticipated by Harold Bloom when, lamenting the “current American paranoia in the Age of George W. Bush,” he explains how this paranoid state “ought to engender an opposing force like the Tristero, an underground postal system that is something of an alternative culture. . . . It is what Pynchon elsewhere terms sado-anarchism” (2003, 10). Bloom ends this brief introduction by



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expressing exhaustion with the contemporary mediasphere—and then, perhaps more hopefully, with a personal wish: “There had better be a Tristero [i.e., Sado-Anarchist system], at least in our imaginations” (11).<sup>3</sup> Bloom’s wish notwithstanding, critical discussions of s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow* do not identify it with Sado-Anarchism’s “opposing force” but, rather, locate it in the coercive contexts established by Their System. Such pessimistic readings of the sexual politics at work in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are typified by Herman and Weisenburger’s recent argument that Pynchon’s “liberated narrative techniques” ultimately fail to “connect to a politics, a practice, capable of addressing the alienated individualism, the thwarted prospects of nurturing and community, and the deathward trajectory of all the plots *Gravity’s Rainbow* otherwise represents. The novel’s dark ending gives no hope for such a politics; it gives only song” (2013, 166). But such discounting of the ending as “only song” elides the hopeful tone of an earlier song, “Victim in a Vacuum!” situated about halfway through the novel. Addressing “all you masochists out there,” “Victim in a Vacuum!” invites them to sing along and “let each other know you’re alive and sincere,” to “try to break through the silences, try to reach through and connect. . . .” (GR 421).<sup>4</sup> In this, the song interpellates “you masochists” into a community of narrating agents, whose s/m occurs beyond the reach of bureaucratically deployed sexuality.<sup>5</sup> In both “Victim in a Vacuum!” and the final song, William Slothrop’s hymn, direct-address constitutes an invitation to rethink the liberatory potential of nurturing community by positing sexual agency as a community project with the potential to challenge the alienated individualism described by Herman and Weisenburger. Indeed, the refigurative potential of sexual connection expressed by “Victim in a Vacuum!” anticipates gay pornographer John Preston’s recollection of the early gay leather scene, in which “the bonding was profound, it was based on having shared raw sex and on the acceptance of raw sex as a desired goal” ([1991] 1993, 127). By identifying “raw sex” with the potential for revolutionary human connection, both the gay leather scene described by Preston and “Victim in a Vacuum!” offer s/m as a mode of temporary community that rejects progressive politics and the procreative imperative in favor of a pleasure-focused connection, occupying the cultural margins.

Significantly, Herman and Weisenburger elide both the rise of queer sexual subcultures at the time Pynchon was writing *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the queer sexual practice of Margherita Erdmann, the novel’s sole self-proclaimed female masochist. As if in response to “Victim in a Vacuum!” Margherita actively constructs her own s/m narratives, breaking through



the silence and connecting with others in embodied pleasure. She thus functions as the case study for a queer revision, a model of Pynchon's queer-postmodern poetics. Her erotic reliance on postmodernist narrative strategies reveals how s/m actively frustrates both normative narrativity and narratives of normativity. In contrast to other instances of s/m in the novel, Margherita's sexual encounters are scattered over a wide range of episodes. This unique portrayal of s/m enables a deeper understanding of how, why, and with what effect Margherita practices s/m. Moreover, many of her sex scenes—incorporating a larger cast of characters and a wider variety of narrative techniques than any other s/m in the novel—involve a range of sexual stigmas, including masturbation, voyeurism, orgies, incest, anal intercourse, sex toys, fetishes, and the eroticization of infantilized women. We might liken the queer subversive potential of Margherita's s/m to Lee Edelman's articulation of “queer negativity” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), which theorizes “queer negativity” as an oppositional practice disrupting the heteronormative social telos that privileges futurity and reproduction. Specifically, Edelman calls for an embrace of a queer subject position that is rendered unintelligible through a resistance to reproductive futurism—a heteronormative narrative that privileges the Child as the symbol of generational succession and marginalizes queerness for its non-procreative practices. For him, “the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political—their opposition, that is, to the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject” (Edelman 2004, 13–14). Indeed, resisting the heteronormative narrative that yokes identity with futurity enables a refiguration of sexual and social narratives through queer practices, in this case through the destabilizing narratives of s/m.

Though Edelman's queer negativity has been criticized by Elizabeth Freeman as a “white gay male argument” (2010, 143) and by Judith Halberstam, who reads the pleasures of queer negativity as “primarily available only in relation to male-male anal sex” (2011, 150), identifying s/m as a practice of queer negativity extends the applicability of Edelman's polemic to individuals occupying a diverse range of subject positions.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, understanding s/m as a fundamentally narrative practice that becomes central to Pynchon's destabilized, postmodern narrative structure, echoes Edelman's emphasis on the structural relation between queerness and its opposition to heteronormative teleological narratives.



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While Pynchon's centrality to theories of literary postmodernism is well established,<sup>7</sup> the queerness of *Gravity's Rainbow* in those readings remains curiously absent, just as criticism has largely overlooked the ubiquity of queerness throughout Pynchon's oeuvre.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in light of the rise of queer theory over the last thirty years, it is surprising that detailed discussions of Pynchon's unparalleled approach to sexuality itself remain a rarity. Aside from the explicit s/m scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow*—Katje and Gottfried's submission to Blicero's "Rome-Berlin Axis"; Pudding's coprophagic submission to Katje as Domina Nocturna; Margherita's multiple s/m scenes; and the s/m climax of Blicero and Gottfried's relationship when Gottfried is entombed and launched in Rocket 00000—there are innumerable other instances in the novel that carry sadomasochistic valences, such as Leni's observation that Franz Pökler "needed to be at someone's command" (GR 421) and young Enzian's submission to Blicero in South Africa, to name only two.

Among the few articles on s/m in *Gravity's Rainbow*, even fewer have recognized s/m's potentially transformative power. In 1977, Lawrence Wolfley, for example, argues that the culture in *Gravity's Rainbow* is "committed to the death instinct" (1977, 883), and the only hope is to establish a dialectic between Eros and Thanatos—a transformative dialectic I locate in s/m practice itself, though Wolfley is not so explicit. More than twenty years later, John Hamill offers an in-depth reading of s/m in his article, "Looking Back on Sodom: Sixties Sadomasochism in *Gravity's Rainbow*" (1999), identifying s/m as a process of retreat into the self, a reaction to social entrapment.<sup>9</sup> However, Hamill's nuanced analysis of s/m is the exception rather than the rule. Most Pynchon critics read s/m as a perversion of sexuality produced by the dominant power structure, and such readings focus primarily on male s/m. When female s/m practice is very occasionally acknowledged, it is quickly dismissed as pathological or as male-authored pornographic fantasies. In 1976, for instance, Marjorie Kaufman writes that Margherita "has no identity beyond the roles she plays" (1976, 222), while in 1992 Michael Bérubé suggests that, "it may be that Greta Erdmann is a woman 'constructed' by male fantasies of woman's sexual pleasure, 'constructed' so effectively as to be those fantasies" (1992, 264). Recently, Herman and Weisenburger have argued that either Margherita's masochism is a result of her movie roles, or that her movie roles enable her to enact "long-held paraphilias. Either way," they claim, "she exists beyond repair" (2013, 121). Beyond the implication that Margherita is somehow "broken," the repeated use of "paraphilia" to describe s/m pathologizes the practice of consensual sadomasochism as a



symptom of a mental disorder, reflecting the antiquated understandings of sexuality that pervade Pynchon criticism.<sup>10</sup>

In identifying the major undercurrent of stigmatized sexuality in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a form of queer negativity, I highlight a cultural/sexual/political formation that underscores the entire narrative. In part, this attempt builds on Brian McHale's foundational work on postmodernist narratives, especially his observation that "postmodernist representations of sadomasochism function as models of the 'sadistic' relation between text and reader" (1987, 226). Focusing on Margherita, I try to develop McHale's theorization one step further, arguing that her sexual practice models the sadomasochistic relation between narrative content and structure. For Edelman, queer negativity grants access to a disruptive jouissance, "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" (2004, 25). But this definition of jouissance, as that which transcends both ontological and epistemological boundaries, can also be read as a description of Pynchon's postmodernist poetics.

Closely examining the narrative aspects of Margherita's s/m reveals that s/m and queer negativity are in *Gravity's Rainbow* simultaneously symptoms and causes of postmodernist narrative instability. Postmodernist fiction, in McHale's account, emphasizes ontological uncertainty on both the poetic and thematic levels,<sup>11</sup> which calls to mind the destabilizing function of queerness in Edelman's theories (though *No Future* doesn't address s/m per se<sup>12</sup>). Indeed, in *Gravity's Rainbow* we find a narrative that resists "generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence" through its avowal of queer practices that privilege the death drive over heteronormative futurity (Edelman 2004, 60). I posit, then, that the postmodernist commitment to linguistic indeterminacy, effected by instability on both the narrative and discursive levels of the text, offers a new lens for reading Margherita's construction of s/m narratives.

## Margherita and female (sexual) agency

Margherita's desire to be "punished" forms a central part of her sexual pleasure and her erotic narratives, as Tyrone Slothrop discovers when he encounters her in the Zone. Antagonizing him until he physically hurts her, Margherita "begs to be tied with her stockings, star-fashion, to the bedpost. Sometimes she'll leave the house, and stay away for days, coming home with stories about Negro MPs beating her with nightsticks, screwing her in the asshole, how much she loved it, hoping to trigger



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some race/sex reaction, something a little bizarre, a little different . . ." (GR 453). This anecdote is one of many instances in which Margherita goads Slothrop or, more nearly, incites him to sadistic action. Here, the racialized dimensions of her s/m narrative reflect her perceptive understanding of Slothrop's repressed sexual anxieties—recall his racially charged sodium amytal hallucination of chasing a mouth harp down the toilet, Slothrop relieved at having "shaken them off, left the last Negro touch back up there [. . .] his virgin asshole preserved" (66)—rather than a manifestation of her own desire. By successfully constructing stories to provoke a sexual reaction, Margherita deploys elements of (postmodernist) narrative previously reserved for the narrator. Among the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, only Margherita offers metadiegetic narratives that prompt action on the narrative's diegetic level.

The uncertain ontological status of Margherita's rape claim aligns it with postmodernist narrative strategies. Neither Slothrop nor the reader have a way to corroborate her stories. Are they "factually" true? Are they her sexual fantasies? Or are they outright lies? McHale observes a recurring "concretization-deconcretization structure" in *Gravity's Rainbow*: sometimes an explicit warning that material is not part of the text's "real" world either precedes or follows a scene in question; elsewhere an episode's unreality is marked either by an "internal contradiction, or incompatibility with the frame of 'reality' within which the episode has been placed, or by some gross violation of extra-textual norms of verisimilitude" (1992, 67, 68). In McHale's view, this structure often appears in relation to taboo behavior, drug hallucinations, or (Slothrop's) dreams and sexual fantasies. Margherita's quasi-pornographic narration of a violent sexual encounter with "Negro MPs," however, does not conform to the structural patterns McHale describes. Rather, the ontological status of her erotic (fantasy) narratives remains unknowable for both characters and extra-diegetic readers.

Despite the indeterminacy of their status, Margherita's narratives have "real" effects within Pynchon's fictional world, as her articulations of taboo behavior prompt Slothrop to sexual arousal. These effects illuminate Margherita's relationship to the text's postmodernist poetics and the queerness underlying her embodied and narrative practices, which seem to have no goal other than her own pleasure or jouissance. Recalling that Margherita conceives a child during a scene filmed for *Alpdrücken* may seem to problematize any alignment between her s/m and queer negativity; however, this moment can still be read as a



disruption of heteronormative values in that the identity of Bianca's father remains unknown. Her uncertain parentage exposes Bianca to sadistic games—"Back at Bydgoszcz it became an amusing party game to speculate on who the child's father was. [. . .] They'd run the film and ask Bianca questions, and she had to answer yes or no" (GR 469)—thus undermining both the privileged/protected status of the Child and the organization of the nuclear family within heteronormative society. Given Margherita's queering of the heteropatriarchal family unit and her investment in pleasures that refuse the traditional social-biological functions of sexual practice, Margherita's s/m decouples her sexual practice from the narrative of reproductive futurism as Edelman has defined it. In doing this, Margherita destabilizes Slothrop's and, by extension the reader's, ability to locate teleological narratives.

The text's discursive structure thus places the postmodernist tendency to destabilize traditional narratives directly into the hands of a character, who also happens to be a woman whose masochistic pleasure in film and in life is made explicit by Stefania Procalowska: "Margherita's problem was that she always enjoyed it too much, chained up in those torture rooms. She couldn't enjoy it any other way" (GR 469). In her reworking of these (filmic) s/m scenarios with Slothrop, Margherita reclaims the culturally constructed subjectivity her (pornographic) film roles projected onto her. Of course, masochism is not solely the purview of Margherita. During Pudding's coprophagic practice, "he is thinking [. . .] he can't help it, thinking of a Negro's penis, yes he knows it abrogates part of the conditions set, but it will not be denied, the image of a brute African who will make him behave" (238). Significantly, Margherita's and Pudding's fantasies both incorporate racial difference, linking them to Slothrop's sodium amytal vision of the Roseland Ballroom that reveals what Herman and Weisenburger describe as his "deeply unconscious cathexis of blackness and shit. . . . Slothrop's unconscious horror at interracial homosexual rape has its counterpart in his interracial homosexual delight in the 'callipygian rondure' of Whappo's buttocks" (2013, 195). But while eroticized racial difference seems to be almost inherent in sexual fantasies in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the fact that three different characters—of three different national origins and three widely different ages—share such fantasies, seems to indicate that such racialized eroticism has more to do with Pynchon and the historical context from which he wrote than with a specific character's relation to race. In a novel written during the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist and Separatist movements, such widely



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dispersed racialized eroticism functions more as a minor commentary on the persistent global effects of slavery and colonialism in the West, or, as Herman and Weisenburger see it, “This material teaches . . . that American racial fantasies, and British too for that matter, are close cousins of those of good Aryan Germans.”

Within these three sadomasochistic scenarios, only Margherita articulates and enacts her fantasies. Where Pudding’s and Slothrop’s are never vocalized, Margherita narrates hers to Slothrop, inciting embodied practice—and achieving textual authority in a way that Pudding and Slothrop never do. Her language prompts embodied male action, and this narrative control leads to a queer sexual practice that ultimately dismantles received notions of womanhood, female agency, and accepted forms of female desire. Her s/m subverts the heteronormative logic that normally denies jouissance, a disruptive pleasure splitting apart the fantasy of heteronormative social telos, and offering instead a queer pleasure, a degeneralized sexuality, and a narrative thoroughly invested in instability.

## Critical perversions

Queering Margherita’s narratives allows us to reconsider a decades-old critical consensus, most recently formulated by Herman and Weisenburger: “The narration ascribes Greta’s sadomasochistic conditioning to her acting in filmed scenes of whipping and sexual domination, scripted for fascist audiences” (2013, 76). Indeed, the pathologizing link between s/m and Fascism so many critics foreground is often used to implicate Margherita in the grotesque failures of the 1960s “free love” ethos, like the Manson family. Equating s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow* with the failure of 1960s liberationist, free love movements, Herman and Weisenburger write that “the horrors of failing that kind of liberation, of regressing into delusional and psychotic paranoia, were also readily apparent. Most sixties histories point to the August 1969 Manson family murders of a pregnant Sharon Tate and four others as one object lesson” (66). For them, the failure of such alternative family structures and nonnormative sexual politics are made visible in the corrupt family dynamics of Blicero’s domination of Katje and Gottfried, and, indeed, they suggest that “the ghastly scenes of [Weissmann’s] obsessional and sadomasochistic hetero- and homosexual rape-tortures of Katje and Gottfried compos[e] a grotesque mock family (think Charles Manson)” (78).<sup>13</sup> The logic of this reading would equate Margherita’s sexual desires with such perversions of the free love movement.



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However, Margherita's desire to be cut and penetrated reflects a narrative of unbecoming that resists the types of identity politics associated with 1960s countercultural movements.<sup>14</sup> Rather than an unconscious perversion of love, liberation, and human connection—as Herman and Weisenburger's reference to the Manson family suggests—Margherita's performances actively critique the idea of sex as the epitome of 1960s values. This criticism of the 1960s free love ethos as nothing more than a hollow and ineffective form of resistance is repeated throughout the novel, as when the 1960s counterculture rallying cry, "An army of lovers can't be beaten," is inverted and replaced with "AN ARMY OF LOVERS CAN BE BEATEN" (GR 161). In *Gravity's Rainbow* love is not—as the 1960s movements had hoped—an expression of connection and humanism, but rather it becomes an unpredictable and disruptive force, easily appropriated by institutions of power. In dismantling received cultural understandings of "love" and replacing them with her own sexual pleasure, unfettered from social values and any optimistic teleology, Margherita evacuates the signifiers "love" and "sex" so thoroughly that she can redefine them on her own terms. Indeed, Herman and Weisenburger's focus on perversions of the 1960s free love ethos neglects an equally relevant, but queerer, historical context: the Stonewall Uprising in 1969.

The publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* coincides both with an increase in queer subcultures, like the gay leather community, and with the Cold War Era conflation of Nazi/Fascist themes and hypererotic pleasures, which became one way of coping with the unprecedented violence of the Final Solution, rocket technology, and nuclear power. In representing this conflation, Pynchon's novel contributes to the proliferation of eroticized Nazi/Fascist imagery in films, novels, and art that circulated in the 1970s and early 1980s, e.g. Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter* (1974), Lina Wertmüller's film *Seven Beauties* (1975), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Lili Marleen* (1981), and Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* (1983). Similarly, Nazi/Fascist imagery—a shorthand for the eroticization of taboo (power) relations and hypermasculinity—often inflected the images of gay leather culture, as in Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, and in Tom of Finland's art, which in the 1970s became widely available in the United States. As it happens, the queer potential of Pynchon's s/m did not go unnoticed by the gay leather community. In an interview for *Drummer* magazine—the ur-leather periodical—Edmund White applauds Pynchon's Sado-Anarchism and suggests that "the need for combativeness is worked out in leather sex. . . . There's also the feeling of [leathermen's] being well-seasoned; of really knowing themselves and of having admitted



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a lot of things about themselves" (1980, 50). Margherita's s/m thus seems closer in spirit and execution to gay leather culture, which consciously distanced itself from hopeful lesbian and gay rights activism, than to any failed 1960s free love ethos. According to the famous gay pornographer John Preston, "The original leather bars were places where men could gather and, in sharp contradiction to those positions [gay and lesbian assimilationist politics], say: *In your face!* . . . It took sex as its own ultimate value" ([1991] 1993, 128). Indeed, Margherita's capacious desire for multiple sexual encounters, despite other characters' (and perhaps readers') pathologizing gaze, her commitment to fleeting sexual pleasures and to refiguring the purpose of sexual practice, and her resistance to normative sexual narrative, all parallel the ethos of nascent gay leather culture in the early 1970s.

Margherita's empowerment emerges in contrast to the only other female s/m practitioner in the text. Unlike Margherita's powerful articulations of sexual desire, largely demonized by critics, Katje's explicit passivity during two bureaucratically organized instances of s/m has prompted them to "excuse" Katje's behavior—both sexually and politically. Despite their differences, the novel cultivates parallels between the two women. For both, their initial s/m practices are preceded by descriptions of them on film. In the first instance, the narrator's description of Katje being secretly filmed by The White Visitation transitions into Katje's memory of her submission in the "Rome-Berlin Axis" scene, when Blicero "is plugged into Gottfried's upended asshole and the Italian at the same time into his pretty mouth" with Katje "serving [. . .] as human pillow" (GR 96). In the second instance, a summary of Margherita's sexually submissive role in *Alpdrücken* precedes her reenacting that scene with Slothrop. Their similarities are observed by Slothrop himself, who, upon first meeting Margherita on the *Alpdrücken* set, thinks of her as "his latest reminder of Katje . . ." (403), and the details of their masochistic submission also seem to connect them: in her film roles Margherita was "usually strapped down or chained to something" (400), much like Katje who was "passive, bound, and gagged" (96) for Blicero.

The context of Margherita's encounter with Slothrop, however, complicates any easy equation of the two women. In the Zone, Margherita is never a coerced and silenced submissive, like Katje, but rather the active and vocal author of her own pleasure. With her explicit sexual agency, Margherita is the anti-Katje, a paradigm of s/m's queer-postmodern potential. If we are to accept the generally positive readings of Katje, which redeem her from her Nazi past—despite her being "credited with



smelling out at least three crypto-Jewish families" (99)—it seems only fair that we should be equally generous in our readings of Margherita.

Few critics, however, acknowledge the highly discontinuous depiction of Margherita that enables such a refigurative reading. They fail to distinguish between Margherita's behavior as a puppet in the Rocket System—a fragmented and paradoxical version of her we mostly learn about secondhand—and the more cohesive, self-possessed version of Margherita that Slothrop meets after V-E Day, in the Zone. Eliding this distinction, Herman and Weisenburger, for example, indiscriminately call Margherita "another good Nazi . . . murdering Jewish children as if she were the Shekhinah gathering shattered bits of the profane world" (2013, 178). In focusing only on Margherita's past, they allude to Ensign Morituri's Story, which, relayed to Slothrop in 1945, six years after the events, blames Margherita for the mysterious disappearance of Jewish boys in the resort town Bad Karma in 1939. But, without denying Margherita's murderous past, we can also see how the textual cues pointing to redemptive readings of Katje also point toward refigurations of Margherita. The Kabbalistic motif coloring Margherita's Bad Karma days—in her murderous fugue state she identifies as the Shekinah—echoes the Kabbalistic overtones of Katje's performance as *Domina Nocturna*, a figure from German mythology whom Katje calls "blessed Metatron" (GR 234), a reference to "an avatar of the Shekinah, the mother of material being and of dissolute death" (Weisenburger 2006, 145). Like Margherita's past submission to Nazi control, Katje's s/m with Pudding, orchestrated by the System (here The White Visitation), explicitly draws from Blicero's Nazi s/m: Katje "has watched Captain Blicero with Gottfried, and has learned the proper style" (GR 239).

While many critics absolve Katje of her horrific past, none show the same generosity towards Margherita. Tellingly, Herman and Weisenburger find a critical, narrative function in Blicero's s/m game, in its "allusions to Germanic folktale," which "signal the ways that Weissmann's manias are culturally encoded, and the narration opens the door to historical and ethical critiques of Nazi Germany" (2013, 79). While they don't exactly excuse Katje's participation in Their System, Herman and Weisenburger emphasize the *institutional* deployment of s/m in Katje's case, yet they make no such allowances for the System's influence over Margherita during her (murderous) fugue state. Nonetheless, there is enough textual evidence to assume that Margherita remained under Their control until sometime in Spring 1945 when, after testing what would become Gottfried's death shroud, the Imipolex bodysuit, she is suddenly ejected



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from Their System and born anew, a rebirth as a liberated figure of the Zone almost literal in its imagery: "Time had lost meaning. One morning I was outside the factory, naked, in the rain" where, she tells us, she "felt a silence waiting for me up there. Not for them, but for me alone . . . my own personal silence . . ." (GR 496). In this post-V-E Day rebirth, Margherita is remade, ultimately breaking through that silence—the Zone's blank slate—by claiming, narrating, and enacting her own sexual pleasures.

When we do encounter Margherita in the Zone she, like Europe after V-E Day, has broken away from Their System, from the old power structures, and from the paranoid wartime mentality that ultimately produced her psychic break in 1939, culminating in a fugue state hysteria of which she has no memory.<sup>15</sup> By July 1945, we have left behind the Margherita of the past, the actress of Gerhardt von Göll's pornographic and propagandistic films who was, like Katje, merely the System's pawn. Indeed, Morituri makes clear that Margherita's violence in *Bad Karma* coincides with her psychic break. It would thus be a mistake to argue that her freely practiced s/m, in the Zone no less, necessarily implicates her in the awfulness of the Rocket System. Indeed, her s/m is anomalous among the other practitioners, who without exception submit to s/m explicitly deployed by the System prior to V-E Day. Whether that System operates under the flag of Allied or Axis powers, all—except Margherita in the Zone—are imbricated in the institutional cooptation of embodied pleasure. But Margherita and Slothrop's s/m, among the literal ruins of former power structures, occurs outside any System or surveillance—a liberating and resistant, though fleeting, practice, counterpointing both the Blicero/Katje/Gottfried triad and Katje and Pudding's coprophagic scene. Recalling Thanatz's theorization of Sado-Anarchism, we can say that while Blicero's and Pudding's s/m suggests that dominance and submission are resources the Structure needs for its survival, Margherita refigures these resources for private pleasure, the dissemination of which destabilizes the System and, by extension, queers the narrative as a whole.

Margherita's narrative authority distinguishes her s/m on the discursive level as well. In both Blicero's and Pudding's s/m, the narrator retains control over the narrative and thus over these queer modes of expression. Though during his s/m the reader learns of Blicero's articulations—in Katje's memory, "each utterance a closed flower" (GR 96)—in the "Rome-Berlin Axis" scene we get no extended narrative focalization through Blicero, only what is mediated through Katje's recollection. The discursive presentation of Pudding's s/m is primarily



controlled by the narrator as well. There, the only direct dialogue is the communication between Katje and Pudding, whose words merely provide the details that fuel an s/m narrative predetermined by Pointsman; their dialogue does not disrupt the institutional deployment of sexuality, and thus they cannot exert significant control over their own narratives.

Again, seeing Margherita's s/m as an instance of Sado-Anarchism counters the critical tendency to elide her agency and read her solely as a sexual object, a trend that replicates the very patriarchal objectification of women such readings nominally critique. As narrator of her own pleasure, she takes control of her own sexuality in a way that no other masochist in the text ever does. Even Gottfried's pleasure is silenced, his words literally blocked and gagged "deep in the throat, the gullet, where Blicero's own cock's head has burst for the last time" (GR 773). The Margherita of the Zone becomes, uniquely, the author of her own desire. By focusing on Margherita as author, we can see that narrative authority is integral to queer empowerment in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

This queer reading contests Herman and Weisenburger's elision of Margherita's agency when they discount masochistic practice as an acceptable expression of (female) sexual pleasure, as seen in their description of Margherita as a "somewhat decrepit movie actress with a terrible desire for men to chastise her flesh" and their description of her film roles featuring her "bound, whipped, and mock raped" (121, 76). If their seeing a "mock rape" improves on Bérubé's understanding that *Alpdrücken* "culminates in the torture, gang rape, and dismemberment of its star. . . . The dismemberment, of course, is not 'real.' . . . But the rape is" (1992, 240), this hardly amends the general erasure of Margherita's agency. Taken as a whole, however, Pynchon's description of the *Alpdrücken* set in fact emphasizes the simulated and consensual nature of Margherita's physical submission: there are "*wood chains*, most of the silver paint worn away now," and she "insist[s] he fasten the *tin manacles* to her wrists and ankles" as "*the old phony rack* groan[s] beneath them" (GR 400, 403, emphasis mine). Clearly, this faux-torture chamber could never—in the initial filming or in her reenactment with Slothrop—physically restrain Margherita. Despite these details, critics continue to elide her agency and insist that her s/m desires are bound by the terms of male pornographic fantasies or, worse still, pathology. Such readings tend to rely on both heteronormative values and anti-sex feminism that narrowly define acceptable modes of female sexual agency/desire. Unfolding in such a faux-torture chamber, Margherita's s/m appears not as rape but a manifestation of her individual desires.



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Equating her s/m practice with (mock) rape, critics do not see Margherita's explicit role in orchestrating her own submission. Even as Herman and Weisenburger acknowledge that Margherita is not actually raped, for example, their discussion of her sexuality relies on pejorative terms—"paraphilia," "passive," "pathetic decadence," and "terrible," etc.—obscuring female agency by casting both Margherita's masochism and s/m practice in general as perverse disorders. Nonetheless, in inciting Slothrop to sadistic action, she is the empowered agent of her own sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Failing to consider this dynamic, readings of *Gravity's Rainbow* have tended to betray an affirmation of heteronormative hegemony, a patriarchal system dependent upon stigmatizing and controlling female desire. In its maligning of Margherita's sexual practice, contrasted with the relative silence about Katje's s/m, Pynchon criticism has been marked by a persistent reification of female sexual oppression.

As an element of her queer practice, Margherita's re-creation of *Alpdrücken* and her subsequent construction of various s/m scenarios induce an ontological slippage between her narratives and her acting roles, associating her sexual and authorial agency with postmodernist narrative strategies. Narrating and enacting her own desires, she refigures the patriarchal (pornographic) film narratives that had previously rendered her an object within the Rocket System. In this way, Margherita becomes the ultimate, subversive Other within the text, circumventing the System's and the narratives' objectifying agenda. Far from a tool for patriarchal oppression, she rewrites these erotic narratives, rendering them an instrument of her queer practice. In her liberated Zone state, then, she reduces the patriarchal narrative to an accoutrement of s/m, roughly equivalent to the tin manacles, phony rack, and padded whip.

## Queerness aboard the *Anubis*

The film narratives Margherita repurposes are not derived solely from her own acting career, nor do her erotic power exchanges consistently reify an immutable, gendered binary of dominance and submission. Later in the novel, Margherita and Bianca are "playing stage mother and reluctant child" for the entertainment of the passengers aboard the ship *Anubis* (GR 473). Bianca impersonates Shirley Temple and performs "On the Good Ship Lollipop," but when Margherita tells Bianca to perform "Animal Crackers in My Soup," Bianca refuses, calling her mother a bitch, and Margherita proceeds to pull Bianca over her lap and spank her bare



skin with a ruler: "Bianca kicks her legs, silk stockings squeak together, erotic and audible now that the group have fallen silent and found the medium of touch, hands reaching out to breasts and crotches, Adam's apples bobbing, tongues licking lips . . . where's the old masochist and monument Slothrop knew back in Berlin?" (GR 474). The performance incites an orgy among the passengers, couples, threesomes, groups, men and women engaging in vaginal and anal intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, even a lone voyeur taking pleasure in the whole scene. Here the sadomasochistic valences of the spanking highlight s/m's queer, postmodernist tendencies, as this localized dispersal of queerness aboard the *Anubis* parallels the way in which Margherita's s/m queers the novel as a whole. The orgiastic domino effect of her performance, disseminating queerness aboard the *Anubis*, is a *mise en abîme* of the narrative's own dialogic relation to Margherita's queerness. By acknowledging Bianca's queer sexuality, this episode also subverts the heteronormative "disciplinary image of the 'innocent' Child," and thus disrupts the teleology of heteronormative narrative, which "permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls" (Edelman 2004, 19). This teleological disruption is underscored by the duo's eroticization of the mother-daughter bond, which, with its lesbian undertones queering the mother-daughter relationship, emphasizes the destabilizing power of queer practices.

This liberatory reading of the passengers' orgiastic pleasures could certainly be complicated by citing Slothrop's fall into the sea—"It's adios to the *Anubis* and all its screaming Fascist cargo" (GR 500)—which, on the surface, seems to align the nonnormative sexual pleasures aboard the *Anubis* with Blicero's sadomasochistic games. What could be more Fascist than the sexual tableaux Blicero gleefully calls the "Rome-Berlin Axis"? However, the context here for "Fascist" suggests that in this instance the term has more to do with the passengers' countries of origin than with their politics and power. I suggest we acknowledge the ambiguity of the passengers and liken them to the thousands of other displaced persons wandering across the Zone, with whom they share far more than they do with the upper echelons of Fascist and Nazi power. Although they are floating instead of walking, largely wealthy instead of impoverished, the *Anubis* passengers—like every stateless individual in the Zone—are caught in the ambiguous realm between power structures, old and new.<sup>17</sup>

As Slothrop observes upon first boarding the *Anubis*, "It is the same old shit that was going on back at Raoul de la Perlimpinpin's place, and for all Slothrop knows it's the same party" (470)—the party that has been going



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on “ever since this piece of France was liberated. [. . .] They drift in from all corners of Allied Europe, linked by some network of family, venery and a history of other such parties” (247). Herman and Weisenburger see the passengers of the *Anubis* as “in the full grip of repressive tolerance, of mindless pleasures managed, it seems, by representatives of the power elite” (2013, 52), even though the *Anubis* is described as “a yachtful of refugees from the Lublin regime” (GR 464). Indeed, these comically ineffectual caricatures of former elites—such as Mme. Sztup and “an elderly lady in lemon organza,” “a major of the Yugoslav artillery in dress uniform,” “a long-legged ballerina from Paris,” “a tall Swiss divorcée in tight-laced leather corselette and black Russian boots,” “a retired Russian banker,” and “two adorable schoolgirls” (474–75)—are now, post-V-E Day, outsiders, losers in the Structure’s game of power, old and new. While this reading does not excuse their former Fascist affiliations, it does return us to that deep ambivalence, so characteristic of other Zone wanderers and of Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative itself. Ejected by the reigning power structures of their respective homelands and now sailing with no real direction, the *Anubis* passengers, despite their pasts, are in their way no better and no worse than the Zone’s many blackmarketeers who service everyone, their tenuous and ambiguous existence in this anarchic world constituting yet another *mise en abîme*: they are a Zone within the Zone.

Having first associated Bianca with Shirley Temple, Margherita’s erotic performance with her subverts both the heteronormative privileging of the Child and the narrative of unsullied and wholesome American youth,<sup>18</sup> further demonstrating Margherita’s ability to queer cinematic and cultural narratives for her own pleasure. By inciting an orgy through her queered Shirley Temple performance aboard the *Anubis*, a ship named after the Egyptian god of the dead, Margherita invokes the relation between queer (narrative) practices and death. The s/m-inspired orgy becomes another instance of the Eros/Thanatos dialectic, highlighting s/m’s postmodernist narrative strategies of the sort also evident in two unfinished narrative arcs associated with the *Anubis*. Bianca’s ultimate fate is never articulated within the narrative. Bernard Duyfhuizen observes that both Bianca’s age and her “disappearance from the fictional universe after her liaison with Slothrop [are] equally vexed,” suggesting that “a mimetic reading misses the postmodern narrative function of Bianca’s decharacterization to the level of a cipher and trap for readers who want teleologically to complete her story by a represented death scene” (1991). And also remaining unnarrated is the fate of the *Anubis* and its passengers—who are likely doomed to “panic the second the sunken iceberg is



knocked, / Naughty 'n' noisy, and very Walpurgisnacht." "That's how the party will end," we're told (GR 470).

While many readers, and even Slothrop himself, suspect Margherita may have killed Bianca, or is at least responsible for her disappearance, these possibilities seem questionable in light of several narrative elements. To begin with, as Duyfhuizen notes, when below decks on the *Anubis*, Slothrop encounters "something hanging from the overhead. Icy little thighs in wet silk swing against his face. They smell of the sea" (GR 540), it appears that Bianca (though she is never named here) died of drowning and also—somehow—of hanging (Duyfhuizen 1991). That he smells the sea recalls Slothrop's fateful lunge into the water when he thinks Bianca has fallen overboard, though we are left wondering how Slothrop could find Bianca hanging below decks if she had already drowned more than a week before. The darkness below decks prevents Slothrop from ever confirming the corpse's existence and, once the lights return, Slothrop finds no evidence of it. Later in the novel, Slothrop wishes, "Let Bianca be all right" (GR 562), further confusing things, as it seems to imply that Slothrop supposes Bianca to be alive.<sup>19</sup>

Exemplifying the postmodernist disruptions of narrative resolution, the unfinished stories of Bianca and of the *Anubis* also associate such narrative disruption with a queer embrace of orgiastic pleasure or jouissance. For Edelman, such disruptive and queer pleasure insists on "the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order's truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance" (2004, 48). The impossibility of symbolic closure on the narrative level of the text, seen in the incomplete narrative arcs of both Bianca and the *Anubis*, parallels the narrative of the rocket—which hovers at the end of the novel, never falling. Amid the seemingly endless iteration of details and the multiplicity of narratives, these two queer narratives ultimately disappear into textual voids, narrative silence.

Like Margherita's emblematic queerness aboard the *Anubis*, the ship itself reflects how queer sexual and textual practice become indicative of the postmodern condition within *Gravity's Rainbow*. The *Anubis* is a floating party, "a fabulous or-gy [. . .] We can't recall just how it star-ted, / But there's only one way it can end!" and the moment Slothrop boards the ship he is surrounded by "a density of orgy-goers" (GR 470, 471). Taken collectively, these elements—Bianca's unnarrated fate, the sexual activities of the *Anubis* passengers, and the concomitant linking of sexuality with death—foreground ontological instability on both the



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narrative and discursive levels of the text. Throughout the *Anubis* episode Pynchon emphasizes the nonnormative practices of the orgy-goers, the “degenerate company Slothrop has fallen in with,” whose exaggerated sexual practices include “a girl with an enormous glass dildo inside which baby piranhas are swimming” and “a Montenegrin countess [. . .] being fucked simultaneously in her chignon and her navel by a pair of octogenarians [. . .] carrying on some sort of technical discussion in what seems to be ecclesiastical Latin” (475). This hyperbolic and comic description of the orgy-goers’ sexual pleasures, aboard a ship named after the god of the dead, is a microcosm of the larger sexual culture that pervades both the thematics and poetics of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Recalling McHale’s suggestion that “if our culture’s ontological landscape is unprecedented in human history—at least in the *degree* of its pluralism—it also incorporates one feature common to all cultures, all ontological landscapes, namely the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death” (1987, 38) clarifies the textual interplay between queerness and postmodernism. Aboard the *Anubis*, which floats metaphorically between life and death, Pynchon depicts an unprecedented pluralism of nonnormative sexuality. The *Anubis* is literally a (free-)floating signifier, a physical manifestation of queer sexuality and ontological uncertainty in postmodern culture.

## Margherita as queer-postmodern text

Like the *Anubis*, Margherita is a central symbol in the text of queer sexual and textual practices, her narrative role linking disparate plot lines and highlighting the novel’s indeterminate ontological landscape. Many readers have observed the text’s doubling and mirroring of characters or, in McHale’s terms, how they “map onto” each other.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the proliferation of such mappings, McHale writes, fuels the reader’s “growing suspicion that almost any character in this novel can be analogically related to almost any other character.” Through mapping, we can connect Margherita’s queer practices to a fundamental postmodernist narrative device, the violation of narrative levels of the text, or metalepsis, which McHale sees as the paradigm of postmodernism’s ontological dominant, best exemplified by Pynchon’s “cinematic images of copulation [that] lead to the conception of two real girls . . . [and] in a final, apocalyptic metalepsis, the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel hangs poised above the theatre in which the film itself is being viewed” (1987, 130).



Significantly both instances of metalepsis cited by McHale are directly linked to Margherita's s/m practice, a practice that also violates narrative levels. Margherita's *Alpdrücken* role leads to the conception of her own daughter, which in turn is the pornographic scene Franz Pökler replays in his head as he and Leni conceive their daughter, Ilse. Margherita's relation to metalepsis, however, is not limited to violations within the diegetic level of narration. When Slothrop whips Margherita until he draws blood, "she kneels and kisses his boots. Not exactly the scenario she wanted but close enough, sweetheart" (GR 453). Although this direct-address is clearly aimed at Margherita on the diegetic level, it collapses higher narrative levels by potentially addressing the extradiegetic reader as well.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, at the end of the novel, the rocket that is both in the film and over the theater where the film plays symbolically continues the arc of Rocket 00000, in which Gottfried is entombed in the Imipolex suit Margherita wore just before her liberation.

Much like Pynchon's postmodernist poetics, driven by the ontological slippage between Eros and Thanatos, Margherita embodies the Eros/Thanatos dialectic through her queer s/m practice, a practice that renders her body a literal text to be read and deciphered. She recalls how "Thanatz would sit with her lying across his knees, and read the [whip] scars down her back, as a gypsy reads a palm. [. . .] Scar-tissue formed silently on her, cell by cell, in the night" (GR 492).<sup>22</sup> In attempting to read her scars, Thanatz figures the interpretive work of readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself. Pynchon's mapping, creating thin lines in a vast network of connection, is represented in the thin lines of Margherita's scars, scars constituting a form of postmodernist text inscribed in her skin. At once a practitioner of s/m, an author of queer narratives, and an embodiment of a queer postmodernist text within a text, Margherita is the point on which much of the novel's postmodern narrative converges.

Although I have foregrounded Margherita's sexual practices as a focal point for the queer undercurrents of Pynchon's novel, sadomasochistic valences are scattered throughout the text and not only in sexually explicit scenes. Indeed, the whole narrative seems to be bound by a sadomasochistic logic—focalized in the novel's central symbol, the V-2 Rocket that frames the entire narrative arc. Pynchon constructs the V-2 Rocket as a gender-queer object, described as a phallus, a penetrating cock, a bride, and a womb from which only death is born—a gender-queer symbol of destruction and desire that figures the queer sexual-textual interplay found in Margherita's s/m narratives. Its sadomasochistic logic embeds it in the same eroticization of violence, power relations, and



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the death drive that characterize Margherita's investment in *jouissance*, a queer pleasure that destabilizes dominant narratives. The rocket's impending, explosive *jouissance* forecloses the possibility of a teleological future in the narrative; in place of *telos*, *Gravity's Rainbow* offers only a queer resistance to futurity.

As the narrative immediately shifts from the fatal climax of Gottfried and Blicero's sadomasochistic relationship to a direct-address of the theatergoers in the novel's final moments, a flash-forward to 1972, the threat of the rocket looming above the theater becomes more than an abstracted warning.<sup>23</sup> The end of the novel breaks "a basic ontological boundary, the one between the real-world object, the book which shares our world with us, and the fictional objects and world which the text projects" (McHale 1987, 180). Indeed, s/m practice is repeatedly associated with breaking the ontological boundaries between text and life, as seen in the dialogic relation between Margherita's film roles and her s/m practice—both of which violate narrative frames through a violent and pleasurable disruption of ontological levels, as noted above. Like Margherita, the rocket is an emblem of the sadomasochistic Eros/Thanatos dialectic, which haunts the entire novel. As a symbol of nonnormative sexual practice and death, the gender-queer rocket becomes a technology of pleasure, of power, and of subversion—a queer, postmodernist symbol of ontological instability that opens and closes the novel without ever completing its narrative arc.

## §

Marie Franco is a doctoral candidate in English at the Ohio State University. Her dissertation examines relations among explicit representations of sex in American postmodern fiction, queer erotica, and post-WWII sexual subcultures.

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## Notes

1. See bell hooks's "Postmodern Blackness" in which she discusses how "postmodern discourses are often exclusionary" (1990, 1). Specifically, hooks argues that "since much of this theory has been constructed in reaction to and against high modernism, there is seldom any mention of black experience or writings by black people in this work, specifically black women" (3).
2. *Gravity's Rainbow* will be cited as *GR*.
3. After Brian McHale alerted me to Bloom's endorsement of Sado-Anarchism and I found its source in the introduction to *Thomas Pynchon* (Bloom's Major Novelists series, 2003), I had difficulty obtaining a full copy of the text. My ebook purchase and multiple interlibrary loan requests all returned the wrong book: *Thomas Pynchon* (Modern Critical Views series, 1986). For some reason, the WorldCat database has the 1986 and 2003 books listed as different editions of the same text, which they are decidedly not. I confirmed Bloom's endorsement through an online preview of the 2003 text, yet these dead ends and misdirections constitute something of a Pynchonian mystery, a series of paranoia-inducing events to say the least.
4. Unless bracketed, all ellipses are original to Pynchon's novel.
5. Such an agential community would form a counterpoint to those instances of s/m occurring within the purview of the System's control, such as Katje's domination of General Brigadier Pudding, a scene that is wholly imbricated in *Their Structure*, given its orchestration by Ned Pointsman of *The White Visitation*.
6. This use of Edelman's theories, which do not explicitly engage with s/m or female sexuality, might seem counterintuitive—particularly given Elizabeth Freeman and Judith (Jack) Halberstam's recent discussions of s/m, not to mention the work of Michel Foucault, Leo Bersani, and Gayle Rubin, whose foundational queer theorizations all engage specifically with sadomasochistic practice. However, Edelman's focus on queerness and narrative makes it especially useful for analyzing postmodernist poetics and sexuality.
7. Indeed, Brian McHale observes that "so ubiquitous is Pynchon in the discourses about postmodernism that we might go so far as to say, not that postmodern theory depends on Pynchon's fiction for exemplification, but that, without Pynchon's fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place" (2012, 97).
8. Queerness has been a consistent component of Pynchon's fiction, from the lesbian obsession in *V* (1963), to the gay nightlife in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and extending through the homosocial intimacy of *Mason & Dixon* (1997).



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9. Since John Hamill primarily engages with male s/m practice in the novel, my own focus on Margherita extends this earlier work.

10. "Paraphilia" persists primarily today in the notoriously conservative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; even the recently released DSM-V (2013), however, no longer classifies consensual sadomasochism as a paraphilic disorder.

11. Leo Bersani has suggested that "the major anxiety provoked by *Gravity's Rainbow* is ontological rather than epistemological" (1989, 107).

12. As mentioned earlier, there has been a resurgence of interest in s/m among recent queer theorists, as seen in Freeman's and Halberstam's work; however, their respective theorizations of s/m cannot account for the diverse functions of s/m in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

13. Herman and Weisenburger also locate the nonnormative sexual practices of Franz Pöckler, Ned Pointsman, and General Pudding within what they identify as Pynchon's commentary on the failure of 1960s leftist politics.

14. For an extended discussion of unbecoming, queer failure, and female masochism, see Halberstam 2011.

15. Her 1939 fugue state is paralleled by a momentary return to mania when Slothrop and Margherita see a veiled woman at Bad Karma, a vision that precipitates Margherita's brief disappearance: "Not only does she avoid the subject of the woman by the spring, she may have *lost the memory already*" (GR 466–67, emphasis mine).

16. Indeed, it is commonly acknowledged that the masochist's "apparent passivity is a ruse intended to disavow what the masochist actually knows to exist but plays the game of denying: his (or her) very real sexual agency and pleasure" (Williams 1989, 212).

17. Herman and Weisenburger suggest that "Pynchon's refugees, denationalized families, former concentration camp inmates, and prisoners of war collectively represent the multitude of stateless persons streaming over occupied Europe in the months following V-E Day" (2013, 142).

18. Thus the ostensible failure of Margherita's motherly intentions (the eroticization of her own daughter) should also be understood as a successful queer performance in which s/m enables the construction of queer narratives.

19. Citing this passage, Duyfhuizen concludes that, at the very least, "either Slothrop has no certainty of Bianca's fate or he is repressing what he knows" (1991).



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20. McHale identifies “a whole system of analogies among characters and events . . . : both Slothrop and Franz Pökler map onto Max Schlepzig; Leni maps onto Greta, Ilse onto Greta’s daughter Bianca, and Greta onto her own earlier self” (1992, 79). Bersani also identifies such “enigmatic and frequently eerie replications,” to argue that “the entire Zone may be a spectral double of the real world, a collection of images simulating scenes from all over the universe” (1989, 105).

21. This use of direct-address problematizes the common critical assumption that Pynchon’s direct-address is intended for a male reader and/or the male viewer of pornography. Though Duyfhuizen argues that Pynchon’s use of “you” is directed at “the text’s male narratees and ultimately its male reader/voyeurs,” in note 2 he acknowledges that “Pynchon has at least one passage, in which the narratee ‘you’ is gendered female, although the passage itself may refer analeptically to Leni Pokler’s childhood” (1991). Similarly, Wes Chapman identifies Pynchon’s use of direct-address as intended for men who “are by far the greater consumers of pornography; men constitute by far the larger proportion of rapists and sexual abusers” (1996). For a complex discussion of direct-address, see McHale 1992, 87–114.

22. This scene exemplifies how *Gravity's Rainbow* is a book about reading. McHale elaborates how “Pynchon’s characters persist in behaving as though their world were a text—which of course, literally, it is—and they its readers. Säure Bummer reads reefers, Miklos Thanatz reads whip-scars. . . . Ronald Cherrychoke reads personal effects (cravat, fountain-pen, pince-nez). . . . Mr. Pointstman interprets the Book (Pavlov, not Holy Writ). . . . Enzian the Rocket-Kabbalist regards the bombed-out German landscape as a text. . . . Again and again postmodernist allegorical worlds collapse into ‘literal’ texts in just this way” (1987, 146).

23. Part of this is that the rocket’s catastrophic potential for destruction is framed—for the first time—through the death of an individual character. The narrative’s focalization through Gottfried, a poignant depiction of Gottfried’s final thoughts, enables the reader to become emotionally invested in the destructive effects of the rocket. For the first time in the novel, the narrator describes the impact of rocket violence in terms of one individual, as opposed to earlier descriptions of the rocket that were focused on physical destruction to land and property and did not reveal the dire effects on an individual character. The emotional tension from Gottfried’s death carries over to the final scene, where a rocket hovers, threatening, above “us.”



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# Acknowledging Addie's Pain: Language, Wittgenstein, and *As I Lay Dying*

Greg Chase

It is little help . . . to take reassurance from the supposed fact . . . that language *is* public, that it is shared. This prompts us to avoid seeking sociably to provide help and example sufficient to *make* it public, to see it shared, the first step toward which might be . . . to recognize when it has become private.

—Stanley Cavell (2005)

In the section of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* narrated by Addie Bundren, she castigates language for its failure to communicate her private experience to others. Recalling her former job as a schoolteacher, she bitterly notes how she and her students "had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching" (Faulkner [1930] 1990, 172).<sup>1</sup> An earlier generation of Faulkner scholars often turned to Addie to draw broad conclusions about the relationship between signifier and signified, as with André Bleikasten's argument that the Addie section demonstrates how language "can never be more than a poor substitute for experience" (1973, 137).<sup>2</sup> Such readings take to heart Addie's insistence that "words are no good" (A 171), that they cannot accurately describe or map onto some sort of nonlinguistic reality. But the image of Addie as cut off from the world, speaking at but never reaching it, encourages readings that focus only on the language or form of Faulkner's texts, at the expense of trying to understand the material and cultural realities the books explore, in which language functions not as semantic failure but as social fact.



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A more recent generation of Faulkner scholars has grown finely attuned to the historical circumstances engaged by a novel like *As I Lay Dying*, recognizing how much is overlooked by critical approaches focused solely on formal or linguistic issues. Yet Addie's words remain on the page, with their self-reflexivity, their bold theories about the relationship between language and experience, words and world. Is there a way to return our attention to Addie's attitude toward language, while also recognizing that this attitude comes to us from a particular speaker, with a particular gender, race, and class identity, and a particular set of life experiences? By way of considering this question, I want to propose that the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Faulkner's contemporary, offers a productive new approach to the linguistic issues the novel foregrounds. Wittgenstein's later work, most notably the *Philosophical Investigations*, presents a view of language as social practice, as custom. And reading Faulkner in light of this view helps us see how words inform and structure Addie's world.<sup>3</sup>

While I don't argue that Wittgenstein directly influenced Faulkner, or vice versa, they do share some important responses to Western modernity. In *Reading 1922*, Michael North argues that "the multiplicity and incompatibility of human points of view were never more unavoidably obvious than in the early twentieth century" (1999, 15), due to historical developments like increased geographical mobility and the unexpectedly protracted conflict of World War I, and he connects the trajectory of Wittgenstein's career to these broader historical shifts. Wittgenstein's first major work of philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—published in English in 1922, written mostly before and during the First World War—posits universal, logical rules that undergird the relation between words and world. But in the late 1920s and the 1930s Wittgenstein moved toward his more "anthropological" conception of language (Monk 1990, 261), recognizing the context-dependent nature of language, the extent to which words take on distinct meanings in distinct social situations. Wittgenstein's sense in the *Tractatus* that "there is but one limit to human reason," as North suggests, comes to look increasingly "imperial in its pretensions" (1999, 38) when contrasted with the case-by-case approach to language Wittgenstein takes in his later work. And this philosophical shift is reflected in formal differences: in contrast to the *Tractatus*'s direct assertion of logical propositions, with few examples and no dissenting



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voices, the *Philosophical Investigations* always highlights the embeddedness of language within specific human practices, like building a house or learning to count, and it gives voice to a range of competing viewpoints.

*As I Lay Dying* shares its distinctly modernist fragmentation of perspective with the *Philosophical Investigations*. When Wittgenstein writes in his preface that "the philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of . . . long and meandering journeys" ([1953] 2009, 3),<sup>4</sup> he may as well be describing Faulkner's use of multiple narrators and short, stream-of-consciousness chapters to relate the Bundrens' trip to Jefferson. Faulkner's novel, that is, constitutes its own type of philosophical investigation, pursuing Wittgensteinian queries about the words-world relationship by embedding them within this particular group of human speakers. Propelled forward into modernity even more rapidly than their wagon advances toward town, the Bundrens use language in an attempt to make sense of altered realities.<sup>5</sup>

The novel suggests that the economic difficulties faced by small farmers like the Bundrens, together with the strict codes of social decorum that structure their lives, prompt an increased preoccupation with the privacy of human experience, and an increased skepticism toward the possibility that language might mitigate this privacy. It is Addie's social isolation, that is, that produces her skeptical theory of language. Drawing on the distinction Stanley Cavell makes, in his own reading of Wittgenstein, between knowledge and acknowledgment, I argue that *As I Lay Dying* represents the consequences of an overly narrow emphasis on the capacity of language to capture truths about the world. Addie focuses on the epistemological limits of language, limits that Wittgenstein also recognizes; however, she goes on to theorize a more complete separation between language and lived experience. The particular words she repudiates—words like "motherhood" and "sin"—attest to the connection between her philosophical views and her deepest lived frustrations. The consequences of Addie's attitude extend to her children—particularly Dewey Dell, Darl, and Vardaman—all of whom, feeling alienated from their society, struggle to gain acknowledgment through language.



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## Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Scarry: shared language, private pain

Wittgenstein's understanding of the relationship between language and internal sensation helps to clarify the distinctive ways in which Faulkner grapples with this same philosophical problem. The *Philosophical Investigations* pushes back against the long-standing tradition in philosophy of attempting to establish precise definitions for concepts—to find the essence of goodness, for instance, or of knowledge. Because for Wittgenstein human language is inseparable from “the activities into which it is woven” (PI 7), it does not make sense to ask about the meaning of a word, as such, outside particular uses of that word. For instance, Wittgenstein asks us to consider the diversity of activities that we describe as games—“board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on” (66)—and points out that we do not require an exact definition for “game” in order to use this word across a range of contexts. Rather, Wittgenstein suggests, shared human customs create a certain degree of “regularity” (207) in language use. It is because words tend to be used in similar ways in similar situations that we are able to learn language at all, and that we actually succeed in understanding and communicating with one another, insofar as we do.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein indicates that the shared nature of language also informs our descriptions of our own internal experience. He tries to imagine a language in which words “refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language” (243).<sup>7</sup> He then imagines the case of a man who labels a particular internal sensation “S” whenever he experiences it, wondering if “S” could become a private word, known only to this speaker. However, Wittgenstein points out that for the man to conceive of “S” as a sensation is already to rely on shared language: “For ‘sensation’ is a word of our common language, which is not a language intelligible only to me” (261). The private word simply substitutes for, and therefore relies on, the speaker's knowledge of a shared term. We learn to use a word like “pain,” then, by speaking with others and familiarizing ourselves with the standard contexts in which people employ this term. When I grimace and say, “I am in pain,” my companion knows what I mean, Wittgenstein suggests, because I am using the word in accordance with conventions we have both learned for its use.



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In "Knowing and Acknowledging," an essay in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), Cavell expands on Wittgenstein's discussion by considering the case of the skeptic: the speaker who, like Addie Bundren, points to the impossibility of knowing another's pain the way I know my own. For Cavell, the fact that the word "pain" is used in shared ways does not actually refute the skeptic's point. After all, when the skeptic says something like "I cannot know you are in pain because I cannot have your pain," we understand this statement; the skeptic does not use words in ways that are incoherent to us, inconsistent with our shared linguistic practices. Moreover, Cavell points out, in a certain sense the skeptic's statement is exactly right: my knowledge of your pain is of a different order than my knowledge of my own, a different level of certainty. To respond to the skeptic, Cavell writes, requires that we attend to a different use of the word "know": that of expressing acknowledgment. In this sense, to say "'I know you are in pain' is not an expression of certainty . . . ; it is an expression of *sympathy*" ([1969] 2002, 263). The problem with the skeptical position is that concern with the inaccessibility of other minds may prompt us to discount our connections to, or obligations toward, those around us. The skeptic's picture of the divide between mind and world relegates not only "objects of knowledge," as Simona Bertacco and John Gibson suggest, "but nearly the entire range of objects of human concern, of *value*" (2011, 109) to the far side of this divide. So Cavell decides that while we cannot know (be certain) of another's pain, we can acknowledge (respond to, do something about) it.

While Wittgenstein and Cavell both emphasize the embeddedness of language within social contexts, the irony of their work is how little grounding it has in historical particularities. Cavell emphasizes that "skepticism . . . is lived and has a history" ([1979] 1999, 468), but he rarely discusses human speakers as constituted by specific historical circumstances in the way that Faulkner's characters undeniably are. In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry returns to Wittgensteinian questions about the possibility of communicating and sharing one's internal experience, and she connects these questions to the economic conditions of modernity.<sup>8</sup> Scarry's discussion of the relationship between bodily privacy and modern capitalism provides a helpful bridge between Wittgenstein's thought and the historical situation represented in Faulkner's text. For Scarry, acts of human creation extend the private human body out into the world, placing it into relationships with other human bodies. The bodily labor involved in producing a cloth, for instance, effects a deep



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connection with the body of the cloth's recipient, mitigating the latter's susceptibility to pain. For Scarry, this extension of the human self through labor has radical consequences: when "sentience" is "made social, placed in universal exchange, one of the most essential facts about sentience has been eliminated—its deep privacy, its confinement of its own experience of itself to itself" (1985, 252).

Modern capitalism, under which the frequency of economic exchange accelerates, might seem to represent the next step in this process of bodily extension, a positive development for the "socialization of sentience" (256). But Scarry, working in a Marxian tradition, describes how the capitalist economy disrupts and restructures this sharing of made products, creating a situation wherein the many exert themselves to create goods that benefit the few and receive little in return. As such, the reciprocity of bodily extension in preindustrial societies no longer exists: producing goods only to sell them to others "heightens and intensifies the problems of sentience" (267). Social and economic relations no longer mitigate the individual's pain (unless that individual is part of the minority who controls the means of production) but rather exacerbate it. In *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundrens illustrate the consequences of this altered situation.

## Relations of family and economy: the Bundrens in the New South

Wittgenstein's linguistic theories, Cavell's articulation of acknowledgment, and Scarry's economic analysis all come together in Faulkner's representation of the historical circumstances confronted by the Bundrens. These reflect a gradual shift in economic relations for rural farmers like the Bundrens between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth, as Don Doyle chronicles in *Faulkner's County* (2001). Before the Civil War, Doyle explains, most poor white farmers tried to produce as much food as possible for themselves and their families, occasionally bartering with their neighbors but rarely entering into economic transactions that took them much out of their own environs. During and after the war, with the price of cotton soaring, many of these same farmers shifted to producing more goods for the external marketplace. Doing so, however, subjected the livelihoods of these laborers to the whims of national and international markets, and prices fluctuated "in ways that to farmers in Mississippi seemed totally disconnected from the amount



of labor they put into producing the cotton" (Doyle 2001, 307). This situation came to a head in the 1920s as cotton prices reached a low point (Matthews 2009, 145).<sup>9</sup>

Understanding the Bundrens in Scarry's terms, we could say that they are increasingly unable to extend their bodies into reciprocal economic relations with members of their family and nearby community. In response to the economic uncertainty that this state of affairs produces, members of the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying* begin to reconceive their economic relationship with their relatives, envisioning themselves first and foremost as individual economic agents, rather than as part of a discrete family unit. Formally, the novel represents such a vision via its use of interior monologue and its frequent shifts in perspective. The breaks between chapters enact the divides between characters, just as the contents of the different monologues reveal the degree to which each character conceals major concerns and preoccupations from the others.<sup>10</sup> Such shifts exemplify Fredric Jameson's notion of the modernist subject as "monadlike container" (1991, 15), and, overall, the novel illustrates Jameson's contention that modern economic conditions replace "genuine group existence or collective vitality" with "social anomie and fragmentation" (1975, 9). At the same time, multiple narrators adopt their own versions of Faulkner's distinctive prose style, a stylistic convergence at odds with the alienation of individual speakers, as though Faulkner wishes to partially counteract the separateness of his characters through his authorial voice. In so doing, Faulkner demonstrates how, both thematically and formally, fiction can investigate issues of acknowledgment in the context of lived, historically situated human relations.<sup>11</sup>

It is Jewel and Anse who most overtly reconceive their economic relation to their family. Whether or not he knows about his parentage, Jewel seems deeply resentful of his association with the Bundrens, and the horse he purchases, with money earned through many nights of secret labor, testifies to his individualistic spirit in both emotional and economic terms.<sup>12</sup> When Anse complains that the horse burdens him with another mouth to feed, Jewel retorts in a way that emphasizes his conception of the horse as *his* (not the Bundrens'): "He wont never eat a mouthful of yours. . . . I'll kill him first" (A 136). For Jewel, the horse is a product of his labor that he wants to keep to himself, keep private, rather than an extension of his body to share with his near relations.

Anse, too, acts as a self-interested economic agent, though he continues to pay lip service to the notion of cohesive familial bonds. He attempts to have it both ways and largely succeeds—taking advantage



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of his membership in a family whenever it proves convenient to do so, while also regularly acting in his own interests, against his relations'. Thus, though he initially complains about Jewel's purchase of the horse, he has no problem selling it himself to pay for a new team of mules. Commenting that he has "never seen a sweat stain on [Anse's] shirt" (17), Darl suggests that Anse has no interest in extending his body through labor to benefit his family members; he does, however, benefit himself by making use of what his relations possess. Taking ten dollars from Dewey Dell to facilitate his purchase of new teeth, he exploits the rhetoric of family cohesiveness to his own ends. He tells her, "I have fed you and sheltered you. I give you love and care" (256), making the case that he and his daughter participate in a relationship of reciprocal giving, and therefore that she should be willing to part with her money. Here, Anse has perverted Scarry's logic of bodily extension and reciprocity: Dewey Dell is fed but not with food that Anse makes (and if he is giving her love, he has a strange way of doing so). Taking more from his family members than he gives in return, even as he establishes his own economic autonomy, Anse helps produce his relations' feelings of radical privacy. And it is in his wife, Addie, that these feelings prove most pronounced.

## Addie's subversive skepticism

We have seen how, in Wittgenstein, collective human practices give rise to shared language. In Faulkner, however, what we see in the emergent modern South complicates this notion, suggesting how a communitarian ethos may be overtly rejected (as with Jewel) or corrupted for more self-interested aims (as with Anse). Insofar as the modernizing South retains recognizable, shared social norms, these norms tend to be founded upon intolerance and oppression, structuring the type of "hegemonic community" that Scott Romine describes in *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (1999, 22), one made up of a particular group of human speakers who—through their shared narratives, beliefs, and practices—represent a coercive and controlling force. In the case of Faulkner's South, the dominant community demands conformity to its patriarchal, white supremacist value system.<sup>13</sup> The bodies of white women, as Diane Roberts observes, played a crucial role in the perpetuation of this system, enabling the creation of new white male heirs, at the same time that dominant discourse conceived of the white woman as curiously "asexual"—a passive, non-agential "vessel" (1994, 186). Through its "insistence on the white mother's innate goodness and morality" (188),



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the hegemonic community sought to maintain traditionally patriarchal gender relations, even in the face of changing economic conditions, and southern religious life helped to police and preserve these traditional attitudes. Churches gave white Southerners "a common language," Doyle writes, which equated moral rectitude for women with "duty and obedience" (2001, 108, 120).

In her narrative, Addie reveals a deep resentment at the constraints imposed by her hegemonic community. She describes childbirth as a "duty," adding, "I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them" (A 174). And she sees that her society's linguistic practices seek to define and control her experience, provoking a hostile desire to subvert such hegemonic modes of speech. The blank space at the center of Addie's section ("The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a ") suggests that what it means to be a woman cannot be accurately represented in the patriarchal language of the dominant culture (173).<sup>14</sup> Where in Wittgenstein and Cavell shared language relies on shared social norms, Addie wants to emphasize how little she shares with her linguistic community, and how little it has chosen to share with her. In light of the status of her body in that community, Addie arrives at the skeptical position that shared language is inadequate to capture her unique bodily experience. Like the man who writes "S" in the *Philosophical Investigations*, she wishes to free herself from public language.

By opening Addie's section with an account of her days as a teacher, Faulkner suggests that this experience proves crucial to the development of her linguistic skepticism. Historically speaking, Addie was teaching at a transitional moment in southern educational practices, during what James Leloudis (1996) describes as a shift from the more traditional "common school" method, concerned primarily with inculcating in white youth conformity to dominant cultural values, to the more modern "graded school" method, which placed more emphasis on individual achievement. In Addie's work, elements of the older system are combined with those of the newer one, as, for example, employing a female teacher would have been more characteristic of the later, graded school model while Addie's use of corporal punishment to enforce discipline is a holdover from the common school approach.<sup>15</sup> Operating at this moment of shifting pedagogical practices, Addie reacts against features of each. In castigating her students as "selfish" (A 170), she responds to the graded school emphasis on individualistic values, while her attempt to perform the more traditional role of teacher as strict authority highlights the ideological contradictions in her work: she is meant to cultivate conformity and



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deference in her students in order to help perpetuate a system by which women such as herself are oppressed by the same demands.

Constrained within a society that consistently requires her to submit to patriarchal authority, Addie wields her own authority to force her students into an acknowledgment of her experience: "I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh . . . , and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life." As Addie recalls it, teaching is a bitter, unsuccessful endeavor to make her students know, to force facts upon them, and, unsurprisingly, she finds that instructing them this way does not yield any sort of mutual understanding; they remain "secret" to her, and she to them. As a result, she resorts to corporal punishment as the only way to effect connection with her pupils. Whipping them makes them feel pain, a feeling Addie understands, so she "look[s] forward" to inflicting pain on others as a way to make them "aware of [her]." And, crucially, this shared experience of pain is achieved not through language but violence.<sup>16</sup>

Addie's work as a teacher, then, leads her to understand language as a medium that is meant to convey knowledge and cannot. While her experiences do suggest that she views language as having a certain pragmatic function, she uses it primarily in ways consistent with her ideas about its inadequacy. Perhaps the most prominent example of her employing words in this fashion is her request that Anse take her body to Jefferson for burial. In this case, Addie trusts language to convey her literal meaning, insofar as she expects Anse to follow her instructions. But Addie's request also reflects her sense of the limited capacity of language to capture her private experience. For Addie, asking to be buried with her people in Jefferson is an act of "revenge" that, she anticipates, "he would never know I was taking" (173). It is, that is, Addie's response to the submissive, unfulfilling role that Anse has forced her to play, her way of achieving in death the freedom from him that she could not achieve in life. Knowing that Anse will remain unaware of the deep resentment underlying her request, Addie can speak in a way that preserves the distance she sees between conventional speech and private self. Her family's taking her body to Jefferson becomes an example of "doing" that, like whipping her students, enables a certain extra-linguistic acknowledgment of her experience.<sup>17</sup>

Though she feels the gap between her society's language and her individual experience, Addie's own words reveal the depth of her



embeddedness in communal linguistic practices. The words Addie denounces most vehemently are often constrictive, explicitly ideological terms like "motherhood" and "sin," but as she formulates her rejection of such controlling terminology, Addie still reveals herself to be working off shared definitions of these very concepts.<sup>18</sup> For example, in her critique of "motherhood," Addie explains how the birth of Cash, her first child, teaches her "that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not" (171–72), implicitly locating "motherhood" as created by a man, as defined within the patriarchal discourse that binds her. However, the sentence by which Addie repudiates the communally inscribed definition of "motherhood" in fact depends upon this same communal understanding in order to make sense—an understanding that Addie and we as readers share. As she contends that "the ones that had the children"—i.e., the mothers—don't need this word to describe themselves, Addie reveals her sense that conceiving and bearing children is what "motherhood" entails.<sup>19</sup>

Addie's implicit acceptance of a public meaning for "motherhood" is also evident in her sense that "words that are not deeds" are, rather, "fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother" (174). For Addie here, words fall short of lived experience, are capable only of fumbling awkwardly at "deeds" in the attempt to encapsulate them. Here again Addie's metaphor relies on, and takes its force from, a shared understanding of the word "mother": the point of the figure is that the orphan's relation to this supposed mother is inadequate, lacking—because having a mother implies being familiar with her, implies that she is more than just a face in a crowd. Addie also imagines that the orphan is "told" these people are her parents, but the issue is not that the words the orphan hears are inadequate or ambiguous; in fact, precisely the opposite is true. The orphan *does* understand the word "mother" (otherwise the metaphor loses its power), and it is *because* she understands the term that hearing it applied to a stranger is unsatisfying. So, even as Addie objects to the limitations that a traditional definition of "motherhood" imposes on her, she reveals that her understanding of this concept nonetheless informs and structures her picture of the world.

Another word that Addie explicitly disavows is "sin." To see her embeddedness in broader linguistic practices, though, it is worth comparing her use of the word to that of Cora Tull and Whitfield, who narrate the sections immediately preceding and following Addie's. As with



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"motherhood," Addie imagines that "sin" is invented and used only by those who need to describe something they do not experience themselves. Addie envisions her affair with Whitfield, the minister, as highlighting and confirming this separation between word and world: "I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air" (175). Despite elsewhere emphasizing how little access she has to others' minds, here she attests that Whitfield shares her conception of "sin" as restrictive clothing to be cast off: "I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin" (174-75). In contrast to this relationship, which she sees as taking place beyond the confines of language, Addie points to Cora as someone who uses "sin" unproblematically and in so doing affirms its irrelevance, one of those for whom "sin is just a matter of words" (176).

In one sense, Cora's use of the term "sin" bolsters Addie's claim that it has become an empty word, for Cora's positions on its use prove contradictory and hypocritical. After Addie admits to having sinned, Cora critiques her for being presumptuous enough "to say what is sin and what is not sin," before going on to confidently assert that "the only sin [Addie] ever committed was being partial to Jewel" (167). In saying that humans cannot define "sin" and then defining it herself, Cora offers an incoherent account of the term's relation to lived behavior and uses it like the "dead sound" (175) Addie imagines it to be. However, as Wittgenstein reminds us, one speaker cannot unilaterally change or negate the meaning of a concept, and to see that Cora misuses the term is to affirm, not to deny, that "sin" retains coherent meaning in this society. Moreover, Cora and Addie are evidently employing this term more similarly than either realizes; a major reason why they are speaking at loggerheads in this conversation is because Cora does not know about Addie's affair with Whitfield. Their understandings of the word "sin" are not identical, as Addie would presumably contest Cora's claim that her love for Jewel is sinful, but they are similar, as both would presumably agree that Addie's extramarital relationship constitutes "sin" as their society defines the term. The principal difference between the two speakers is over the significance of "sin," rather than its signification: Addie wishes to reject this term and the limitations it places upon her; Cora readily accepts it as an accurate descriptor of particular human behaviors.

Whitfield's section shows that he too employs a conventional understanding of "sin." Whereas Addie imagines him to be a kindred spirit in recognizing the term's inadequacy, Whitfield from the opening of his narrative uses the word in its standard, communally inscribed way.



He affirms that he “woke to the enormity of my sin” and resolves to go to the Bundren household and “confess [my] sin aloud” (177). Here, too, however, as for Wittgenstein, the social constructedness of a concept—and the different views of its relevance that Addie and Whitfield hold—does not render it meaningless in the way Addie imagines. Whitfield ultimately fails to confess his sin, and the blessing he gives at the end of the chapter instead—“God’s grace upon this house” (179)—is certainly an example of language that falls short. However, the shortcomings of his statement in no way reflect the broader shortcomings of language; the problem here is simply that Whitfield substitutes this evasive and clichéd utterance for an honest admission of his transgression against social and religious mores. It is not in his voicing of the word “sin” but precisely in his refusal to speak “sin aloud” that Whitfield’s visit to Addie’s deathbed proves inadequate.

Addie’s skeptical conception of language, focusing on ideologically charged concepts like “motherhood” and “sin,” results from this hegemonic community’s failure to acknowledge her, to recognize and sympathize with her pain. Where for her society these terms are self-evident, expressing essential states, Addie recognizes—in a Wittgensteinian way—that the relationship between these terms and lived experience is contingent and conventional. Unfortunately, without any interlocutors who share her dissatisfaction with dominant discourse, it is difficult for her to imagine a world in which these words are used in alternative ways. Her epistemological doubts—her disbelief in the possibility of knowing others through language—reflect her emotional disappointments, the failure of others to acknowledge the particulars of her experience. Addie’s repudiation of another word, “love,” may serve to clarify this point. That for her “love” is just something Anse says, “just a shape to fill a lack” (172), reflects both her own loveless response to this selfish, lazy man and the emptiness in Anse’s use of the term, evident in his treating Addie as little more than a body to bear his children and keep his house. In other words, Addie’s philosophical skepticism toward “love” as a linguistic sign reflects her unfamiliarity with the lived human experience of marital love.

Unacknowledged in her own life, Addie cannot account for how language might function to promote acknowledgment. Like Cavell’s skeptic, she conceives of words in terms of their epistemological functions only, and by this metric she finds them lacking. Other people, like words, are “outside the circle” (*A* 172) of her identity. In his discussion of the novel, Terrell Tebbetts offers the Cavellian suggestion that “abandoning words means abandoning people” (2010, 83), and thus as Addie remains hostile toward language, she cannot respond to the pain of her own



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children—particularly Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman, who are excluded from the “circle” (A 172) of her identity and associated with Anse rather than herself.<sup>20</sup> Each of these three Bundens, moreover, occupies, like their mother, a marginalized position within this hegemonic community: Dewey Dell is female, Vardaman is a child, and Darl, always marked out as strange, is finally identified as mad. Faulkner’s novel explores the lived consequences for these children of Addie’s linguistic philosophy. Like their mother, all three experience language in its epistemological functions only, at the expense of its emotive ones, and commensurately struggle to receive and to give acknowledgment.

## Dewey Dell, Darl, and Vardaman search for acknowledgment

I begin with Dewey Dell because her views on language most closely mimic those of her mother. As Addie’s only daughter, Dewey Dell shares her mother’s sense of alienation and constraint, evident by her inability to procure an abortion, suggesting that she is en route to a constricting experience of motherhood that largely replicates Addie’s own. Dewey Dell’s first section of narration opens by calling attention to her alienation from her family members, none of whom help her to pick cotton: “Pa dassent sweat”; “Jewel dont care about anything he is not kin to us in caring, not care-kin”; Cash is too busy sawing the coffin; and she “did not think that Darl would” (A 26). Rather than working with her “kin” to their mutual benefit, Dewey Dell does the labor that no one else wants to do, receiving few economic or social gains in return.

Under these circumstances, like her mother, Dewey Dell calls attention to her sense of isolation and doubts language’s ability to bridge the gap between herself and others. Just as Addie feels herself to be a closed circle, Dewey Dell thinks that “it’s like everything in the world for me is inside a tub full of guts” (58). Concomitant to this isolation is Dewey Dell’s difficulty vocalizing emotional anguish. Looking at Peabody during his visit to Addie’s deathbed, she thinks, “*I am I and you are you and I know it and you dont know it*” (51), her twin tautological statements emphasizing her conception of herself as clearly cut off from the family doctor. For Dewey Dell, this stark divide between “I” and “you” ensures an asymmetry in knowledge: she knows “it” (her self, her pregnancy, her pain), and he does not. Though she does not outline her theory of



language as explicitly as Addie does, Dewey Dell does similarly imagine that being "I" means feeling pain one cannot convey to others.

Again following Addie, Dewey Dell understands knowledge in epistemological rather than empathetic terms. When she thinks that if she "were not alone, everybody would know it" (59), Dewey Dell uses "know" to connote factual awareness of her situation. She thinks that if her pregnancy were farther along, if she were more fully aware of the child within her womb, then others would be aware of it as well, and she wishes to forestall this kind of knowledge, for she rightly recognizes that it would cause her problems within both her family and her society more broadly. Her society's deep hostility toward women's sexuality outside wedlock means she is unlikely to be acknowledged, and thus she doesn't share her pregnancy with Peabody, even though he would "know," epistemologically speaking, what to do about it in a way she does not.

Whenever others do come close to Dewey Dell, the novel always figures such knowledge as oppressive and violating. Reflecting on the progression of her pregnancy, Dewey Dell thinks, "The process of coming unalone is terrible" (62), the unwanted pregnancy embodying a relationship that involves knowledge but not acknowledgment; Dewey Dell is certain of the incipient existence of this other being, but her intimate physical involvement with it does nothing to mitigate her emotional isolation. Indeed, in Dewey Dell's experience, physical connection is consistently disarticulated from empathy: she is impregnated and abandoned by Lefe and raped by MacGowan.

The other key relationship in Dewey Dell's life that produces knowledge rather than acknowledgment is with her brother Darl, who has unique access to her unexpressed thoughts. As she relates a conversation that they have "without the words" (27), Dewey Dell portrays the siblings' shared, nonverbalized language as frightening and intrusive: "And that's why I can talk to him with knowing with hating because he knows." Describing Darl looking at her, moreover, Dewey Dell thinks, "Then my dress is gone: I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules" (121), suggesting that Darl's knowledge of her is an unwanted intimacy comparable to that she experiences at the hands of Lefe and MacGowan.

Darl's own perspective on his unspoken connection with Dewey Dell also highlights his preoccupation with acquiring epistemological knowledge of her. Their nonverbal conversations frequently consist of his asking her questions to further, or confirm, his factual understanding of her desires and motivations, as when he wonders if she is eager for Addie



to die so she can get to town more quickly. In this particular conversation, Darl thinks, "She wouldn't say what we both knew" (40); that is, she would not admit to being pregnant. Darl's use of "knew" here is strictly epistemological; he "knows" his sister in the sense of being factually aware of her pregnancy, but he does not recognize the possibility of an alternative way of knowing her—namely, by sympathizing with her plight. Darl repeatedly employs the word "know" in this narrow sense, as when he describes his moment of realizing that Jewel is not Anse's son: "And then I knew that I knew. I knew . . . as plain on that day as I knew about Dewey Dell on that day" (136). In such moments, Darl's understanding of language at once partakes of and departs from his mother's. Unlike Addie, Darl demonstrates confidence in language's ability to convey information about people. However, as he conceives of language primarily in terms of its epistemological functions, his linguistic world, very much like Addie's, largely excludes language's empathetic possibilities.

Yet even as Darl seeks to acquire knowledge, he also reveals a craving for acknowledgment—a desire he struggles to articulate. His difficulty negotiating between these different modes of knowing mirrors his ambivalent relationship toward his own participation in the South's modernizing economy. Deciding to go and transport wood, even though he suspects doing so will result in his missing Addie's death, Darl insistently reiterates the hard fact of the trip's economic payoff: "It means three dollars" (17, 19). Though in the scene Darl advocates for the trip while Anse voices reluctance, in fact Darl's actions here reflect his attempted emulation of Anse's own economic single-mindedness. On the trip itself, however, Darl's thought process shows the degree to which he finds this economic transaction emotionally unsatisfying. As he lies waiting for sleep, he reflects on his and Jewel's strange relationship to the wood they are transporting, describing it as "the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does" (80). John Matthews reads this moment as Darl's recognition of the "suspended non-existence" (2009, 149) of the lumber; it resides in a liminal state—no longer the property of those who grew it, not yet the property of those who bought it. As simply the middleman, Darl is excluded from the exchange of made goods that Scarry describes as mitigating the human experience of privacy.

Recognizing his status as middleman, Darl grows more abstractly philosophical in his thinking about the wood, as though searching for other grounds by which he might confirm his existence. And as he



considers this question, his thought process enacts a progression from issues of knowledge to issues of acknowledgment:

And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*.

How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home. (A 80–81)

In the first section of this passage, Darl draws on logic (admittedly convoluted logic) to establish confidence in his being, his existence as “I.” Here, and as we’ve seen elsewhere, Darl relies on language as a means of establishing facts about the world; he seems to believe that if he can just get the reasoning right, he can be confident that he is “*is*,” that he exists. In the final sentence of the passage, however, instead of problematizing the term “I,” taking it as an object of study, Darl uses it in a more ordinary way, and in so doing he expresses his loneliness and homesickness.

Darl’s ultimate rejection of purely rational, economically driven thinking is his burning of Gillespie’s barn. Illogical from an economic standpoint, his act reflects his desire to save his mother from the posthumous indignity that the journey to Jefferson has become. In response to Darl’s action, his family is quick to write him off as crazy. Only Cash is willing to recognize that “crazy” is a contingent, socially constructed term: “Sometimes I aint so sho who’s got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way” (233). Cash’s thought process here is consistent with an argument Cavell makes that to designate someone as insane is to reveal the limits of our empathetic ability: “If I say ‘They are crazy’ or ‘incomprehensible’ then that is not a fact but my fate for them. I have gone as far as my imagination, [or] magnanimity . . . will allow” ([1979] 1999, 118). At the same time, even as Cash seems to suggest his solidarity with Darl, his use of the generalized term “a man” here abstracts his point in a way that obscures the blood relation between them. And ultimately, Cash deems Darl’s institutionalization justified on the grounds that “nothing excuses setting fire to a man’s barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property” (A 233)—evoking the logic of economic self-sufficiency against his brother. Moreover, sending Darl away, Cash explains, obviates a great financial risk for the Bundrens: “It was either send him to Jackson, or have Gillespie sue us” (232). Cash admits here that



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the Bundrens' difficult economic circumstances make them particularly disinclined to defend Darl; put simply, they feel they cannot afford to acknowledge him.

Darl's difficulty asking for and receiving acknowledgment precipitates and explains his descent into madness. His preoccupation with how to be sure of his individual identity opens a fissure, and in his final section of narration he refers to himself as both "Darl" and "I." In this desperate way, he seeks to effect the acknowledgment that neither his family nor his broader society provides. Split in two, Darl becomes other to himself, an other who can acknowledge his pain. "Is that why you are laughing, Darl?" he asks himself, attempting to recognize and respond to the internal emotional state that has produced this laughter (254). When he thinks, "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl," he acknowledges his place within a family, his connection to the rest of the Bundrens—including, according to this schizophrenic logic, himself. Unable to find acknowledgment within this hegemonic community, Darl creates a community of two in his own mind.

Lastly, Vardaman, the youngest Bundren, still learning to negotiate the relationship between language and world, responds to the destabilizing event of his mother's death by turning to language to explain his suddenly shifted circumstances. Crucial to his linguistic puzzling is the question of whether it makes sense to continue using a word when this word's referent is no more. How, in light of the death of his mother, should he use the term "mother"? Of his mother's corpse, Vardaman thinks, "I thought it was her, but it was not. It was not my mother" (66) and, similarly, after cutting up the fish he catches, Vardaman describes it as "not-fish now" (53). Wittgenstein would say that Vardaman's confusion here results from his conflating the meaning of a name with its bearer: "When Mr. N.N. dies, one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies" (*PI* 40). Unattuned to this distinction, however, Vardaman decides that the only way to continue using "mother" is to equate it with another word the bearer of which is now absent, thus prompting his famously garbled statement: "My mother is a fish" (*A* 84).

Vardaman evidently recognizes that he exists in relation to other members of his family, and that Addie's death calls these relations into question. While his particular linguistic confusions are those of a child, his concerns about the permanence of family relations nonetheless register the emerging economic model that increasingly privileges the individual over the family—a conceptual shift taking place, as we have seen, even



within his own family.<sup>21</sup> As such, Vardaman becomes preoccupied with speaking and re-speaking these familial connections: "Jewel is my brother. . . . Darl is my brother. . . . Darl is my brother" (101). This preoccupation grows particularly acute when new questions are raised about the stability of these relations, as when Darl's institutionalization leads Vardaman to think, "*Darl he went to Jackson is my brother Darl is my brother*" (249).

So Vardaman makes statements that are either factually inaccurate ("My mother is a fish") or seemingly obvious ("Darl is my brother"). But these epistemological claims, statements that describe (accurately or not) factual relations in the world, are also expressions of emotional turmoil. That Vardaman attempts to deal with his disorientation by ascertaining knowledge of the world through language marks him out as both Addie's son and Darl's brother. His shaky understanding of how to use "mother," for example, follows from Addie's own distrust of words. Where Addie protests against the ideological implications of terms whose meanings she understands full well, Vardaman feels genuinely confused about the contexts in which "mother" is or is not used. In teaching his younger brother how language works, Darl says, for example, "Jewel's mother is a horse," and Vardaman responds, "Then mine can be a fish, cant it, Darl?" (101), following Darl in attempting to unpack the logic of Bundren family relations. As such, this moment constitutes one more failure of acknowledgment: Darl responds not by addressing the pain implicit in his younger brother's words but by critiquing their logic.

## Conclusion

Like Wittgenstein's and Cavell's work, *As I Lay Dying* attempts to reconcile the manifestly social nature of language with the persistent sense that one's unique feelings and sensations are incommunicable. Via his use of internal monologue, Faulkner represents the inner lives of Addie and other characters through language—offering precisely, that is, what Addie insists remains inaccessible. Faulkner relies on socially agreed upon meanings for the words he uses in the contexts he uses them, meanings that are stable enough for the novel to remain comprehensible (insofar as it ever was). In thus representing the failure of acknowledgment within the Bundren family and the modernizing South more broadly, his text expresses a sense of compassion for these characters and laments the difficult social circumstances that restrict them. At the same time, the



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linguistic self-reflexivity of Addie's chapter reminds us that we are reading a book, that Addie is a construct of language and creation of her author, and that—precisely by making Addie a character in a novel—Faulkner enables understanding of her private experience in ways particular to the province of literary representation. Through such self-conscious gestures toward its own linguistic construction, *As I Lay Dying* reminds us that the terms by which we acknowledge another's experience in literature may model but are nonetheless not the same as those by which we might do so in life. Focusing intensely on the novel—discussing it, writing on it, being moved by it—we might feel as if we have acknowledged another's pain. In so doing, we run the risk of ignoring potential similarities between Addie's inner voice and those of living people who suffer—people we might not be able to hear. But the text may also alert us to a world beyond itself similarly in need of acknowledgment.

## §

Greg Chase is a doctoral candidate in English and American literature at Boston University. His dissertation, provisionally titled “‘The Silent Soliloquy of Others’: Language and Acknowledgment in Modernist Fiction, 1910–1952,” examines novels by Woolf, Faulkner, Wright, and others through the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Cavell. His work has previously appeared in *Arizona Quarterly*.

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## Notes

1. *As I Lay Dying* will be cited as *A*.
2. Along similar lines, Olga Vickery holds that Addie's chapter demonstrates the difference between “intensely felt reality” and “conventional . . . speech and behavior” (1959, 53), and Floyd Watkins writes that Addie articulates Faulkner's “denial of the efficacy of a moral vocabulary” and preference for “concrete . . . action” (1971, 182).



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3. This Wittgenstein-informed approach is intended to carry forward an emerging scholarly conversation that reconsiders the relationship between the words *As I Lay Dying* uses and the world it describes. Mark Boren, for instance, analyzes how Vardaman's provocative phrase "My mother is a fish" possesses "real force" (2002, 35). As Kathryn Olsen points out, however, the broader applicability of Boren's analysis is limited by his attending only to this one statement. Olsen contends that Faulkner's poetic language reanimates clichéd ways of speaking and is therefore "regenerative" rather than "representational" (2010, 101), though, privileging literary language, her reading does not sufficiently attend to the social realities at the heart of *As I Lay Dying*.

4. After this first citation from Wittgenstein's preface, numbers will refer to individual remarks rather than to pages. *Philosophical Investigations* will be cited as *PI*.

5. As John Matthews writes, "Addie's death is a synecdoche for a whole set of disintegrative events in the novel's world" (1992, 84).

6. One question that Wittgenstein's later philosophy invites but does not definitively answer is how culturally specific we should understand these language practices to be. For my purposes, I will simply point out that the answer to this question depends largely on the word. While which specific activities get designated as "games" will vary to some degree from one culture to another, other words Wittgenstein discusses—like "pain" or "red"—are likely to manifest less cultural variation in their use. But we will also see that the words Addie takes issue with are often those that carry particular weight and have particular connotations in the 1920s American South.

7. The so-called "private language argument" (a phrase Wittgenstein himself never uses) has generated a significant body of criticism. See Mulhall 2007 for a helpful overview of much of this work, as well as a reading of this section of the *Philosophical Investigations* that accords with my own on the major points.

8. Though Wittgenstein's inquiries are highly relevant to her work, Scarry does not explicitly name Wittgenstein as a major influence in the way that Cavell does. *The Body in Pain* cites Wittgenstein once: see Scarry 1985, 16.

9. As Joseph Blotner notes, Faulkner began *As I Lay Dying* on October 25, 1929, the day after Black Thursday (1974, 633). This fact suggests that in portraying the Bundrens he would have been acutely aware of such economic difficulties.

10. Dorothy Hale similarly discusses Faulkner's use of interior monologue as illustrating the disjunction between each character's public and private self (1989, 12).



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11. Cavell also recognizes literature's unparalleled ability to encapsulate the concept of acknowledgment, and his discussion of *King Lear* in "The Avoidance of Love" remains probably the most influential application of the concept to a literary text. Cavell reads Lear's tragedy as his unwillingness to acknowledge Cordelia's love: the king wants to be admired for his power, and he fears the vulnerability that being loved apart from his kingly authority would imply. Like Faulkner, Cavell argues that acknowledgment is of particular concern in the context of family relations; because of one's close ties with one's family members, Cavell suggests, one must work even harder to avoid being known by them. See Cavell (1969) 2002, 267–353.

12. The horse is an indirect product of Jewel's labor, rather than a direct one: in exchange for working Quick's fields, Jewel earns money, which he uses to purchase Quick's horse. According to Scarry, such an intermediate stage of financial payment already testifies to increased alienation from the reciprocal practices of sharing bodily labor (see Scarry 1985, 259–61).

13. For more on how the South's hegemonic system of beliefs controlled communal understandings of race, see the discussion of Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) in Romine 1999, 149–95.

14. Diane Roberts (1994, 197–202) and Annette Wannamaker (2011) make similar points.

15. James Leloudis explains that, even as the graded school pedagogy created more opportunities for women to be teachers, the system still remained "grounded in persistent notions of sexual inequality" (1996, 76) because men moved into most of the newly created administrative and supervisory roles.

16. It is worth noting here that between the publication of the *Tractatus* and his return to philosophy in the late 1920s, Wittgenstein worked as a schoolteacher in rural Austria. He was by all accounts an irascible and violent instructor, displaying frustration at the limitations of his ability to get through to his students, in a way that parallels Addie's account of her teaching experience (see Monk 1990, 192–233).

17. Anse's own explanation of the rationale for the trip contributes to the sense of the inadequacy of language in this social context. He explains that he "promised [his] word" he would take Addie to Jefferson, so that she can "rest quiet" (A 19). Of course, this ostensibly noble description of the trip's function conceals Anse's true purposes, and the actual events of the trip make a mockery of the notion that it is meant to help Addie "rest quiet." Knowing how her husband operates, Addie may be counting on him to carry out the letter, but not the spirit, of her request. By extracting this "promise" (173) from Anse, she sets up a situation that will confirm her conviction as to the inadequacy of this term.



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18. As Cavell writes, "We can disagree in many of our beliefs, but that very disagreement implies that we agree in the use of the words which express those beliefs" ([1969] 2002, 240). Shared language is the precondition for differing attitudes toward our concepts. At the same time, some words "allow or invite" ([1979] 1999, 183) reconceptualization more than others do.

19. This element of motherhood, we might say, transcends the strict social codes of Addie's society; it is a feature that exists more broadly in human usage of the word.

20. After Dewey Dell and Vardaman are born, Addie says that they join Darl in giving Anse "three children that are his and not mine" (A 176).

21. As in the case of his mother and siblings, Vardaman's limited economic resources also contribute to his emotional isolation. He displaces part of his grief over Addie's death into a desire to purchase the toy train in town. In other words, he seeks to be a consumer, to partially mitigate his sense of private, unsharable pain by enjoying the material benefits of another's labor. However, because Vardaman is just "a country boy," this desire goes unsatisfied (A 66).

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# Gertrude Stein, Success Manuals, and Failure Studies

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A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.  
—Gertrude Stein (1947)

Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* encapsulates a major theoretical shift in the attitude of cultural criticism toward failure. Halberstam argues for thinking of failure as a "way of life" characterized by "anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (2011, 23, 20). This vision guides Halberstam's reading of a range of cultural materials, from avant-garde photography and performance art to Hollywood children's films, and in this she sketches an alternative understanding of modern life in which "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3). At the same time, Halberstam does not suggest such dangerous failures as failing to pursue economic security. Despite its broad argument with "norms" of "human development," that is, *The Queer Art of Failure* takes its subject as cultural in a more restricted sense, borrowing its orientation from modernism's reaction to modernity.<sup>1</sup>

For some years before the appearance of Halberstam's manifesto, scholars of modernism had been modeling a similar approach to the period's landscape of failures. Where once Peter Bürger (1984) complained about the avant-garde's failure to transform everyday life, and John Berger (1993) decried Picasso's failure to fulfill the promise of the Cubist revolution, now critics tend to acknowledge that cultural responses to modernity are necessarily, even happily, failures.<sup>2</sup> This tendency has centered on the sense, already present in many modernist projects, that while failure is endemic to modernity, failed art might provide for aesthetic possibility, a sense crystallized in Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*:



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“Try again. Fail again. Fail Better”(1983, 7). Such a view has expanded the archive of material that falls under the heading of modernism, helping critics represent the self-awareness of modernist artists and writers. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s introduction to their collection *Bad Modernisms*, for example, takes a broad view: “No other name for a field of cultural production evokes quite the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior that ‘modernism’ does” (2006, 4).<sup>3</sup>

This scholarly interest in failure also responds to the concept’s increased circulation throughout contemporary American public life, as failure appears across the horizon of debate about the economy, much of which centers on failure as necessary to the systemic function of capitalism. This premise is so widely accepted that, during the financial crisis of 2008, the idea of the big banks as “too big to fail” came under attack from both the left and the right. And in the few short years since, venture capitalists have created a second technology bubble by anticipating the failure of internet start-up companies. The motto capturing current Silicon Valley management and investment strategy practically plagiarizes Beckett—“Fail fast, fail often”—and the tech elite even hosts a yearly conference on failure, mordantly named Failcon. Such developments have trickled down into new conceptions of work. The figure of the alienated artist pursuing transformative innovation has done a lot of cultural work in a job market increasingly defined by the uncertainty of short-term employment. In this context, avant-gardist arguments about bringing art into life no longer serve to critique bourgeois norms but, rather, to describe the actually existing function of art in a period increasingly defined by inequality. If everyone is an artist of failure, and this collective presumption legitimizes the unstable economic conditions produced by neoliberalism, then redemptive critical attitudes toward the art of failure may not be what the present demands.<sup>4</sup>

With failure seeming to appear everywhere across the terrain of American life, no wonder that popular audiences have flocked to films about that earlier moment in which failure became the object of cultural celebration—the so-called Lost Generation. Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011) and Baz Luhrmann’s *Great Gatsby* (2013) romanticize the happily dispossessed expatriates, gorgeously frenetic flappers, and nervous stock drummers of the twenties. These glittering depictions of the modernist heyday frame failure as a blip in the erratic fantasy of bohemian life. Flexible labor can be fun, one imagines, watching an attractively cast Hemingway storming through cafés drunk on the occasional flush



of strong, freelanced American dollars. Glamorous fictions of the “gig economy” resonate from the uncertain rise of the American Century to the precarity of its slow decline.

In what follows I offer a small counter-history of the idea of failure in modernism, focusing especially on Gertrude Stein, whose work has come to draw increased attention in a critical conversation about redemptive failure. I begin by demonstrating that many American modernists actually derived their ideas about failure from the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century success manuals. I then go on to show how, initially, Stein’s particular interest in failure informed her critique, articulated in naturalist fiction, of success ideology from the perspective of queer ethnic womanhood. I then track failure through Stein’s increasingly recondite poetic experiments, which grow out of a sense of art as a cloistered space in which failure might be more fully explored. During the Depression, as she became a celebrity in the United States, she presented her arguments for an art of failure to a mass public, retailoring the idea in terms of the rugged individualism she saw as the solution to the period’s ills. She turned the lush racial and sexual “disidentifications” that first drew her to the idea of failure into an argument for and about white masculinity.<sup>5</sup> Stein thus poses real challenges to twenty-first-century understandings of failure as a redemptive mode of progress and to “failure studies” as a mode of engaged criticism. Failure was, and still is, one of those little words overloaded with significance that Stein so effectively exploited. However, in the crisis of the 1930s, when she settles on its most regressive political and economic applications, its limitations as art become apparent.

## Success manuals and failure

Gavin Jones has recently argued that nineteenth-century literature provides a compelling foil to modernist celebrations of failure: “The nineteenth-century story of failure warrants special attention in its refusal, or inability, to fully invert itself to become an anti-normative alternative” (2014, 14). And this “refusal or inability” also marks the cultural field of success manuals. Indeed, nineteenth-century self-help philosophers often praise failure precisely as a normative force, claiming that failure taught lessons about hard work and the inner resources needed to become a better man. In his classic *Self-Help*, the British popularizer of the idea of self-help, Samuel Smiles, writes: “Failure is the best discipline of the true worker, by stimulating him to renewed efforts, evoking his best powers, and carrying him onward in self-culture, self-control and growth in



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knowledge and wisdom" ([1859] 2002, 4). Smiles casts failure as a helpful god, dispensing fortune and education at turns, a programmatic claim that undergirds his compendium of sketch biographies of successful men. Such optimism, however, assumes both that this "true worker" has the resources to "carry onward" after failing and that he is capable of perceiving the paradoxical "discipline" of failure. In Smiles's text, failure communicates clearly—"stimulating" and "evoking"—but in practice its messages were entirely ambiguous.

In *Successful Men of Today and What They Say of Success*, another self-help advocate, Wilbur Crafts, elaborates on failure's social function:

Failure often leads to success, by rousing a man to greater energy, or leading him to greater watchfulness, or putting him in a more suitable place. . . . A man who weighs one hundred and fifty pounds on the earth would weigh only two pounds on the planet Mars, and so could hardly stand; while on the sun he would weigh two tons and so would sink, like a stone in the sea, into its hot marshes. Each man is too light for some places, too heavy for others, and just right for others. Failing in a work for which he is unfitted often brings him to his true place. (1883, 177)

Failure begins here as vaguely personified, "rousing" and "leading" young men to their variously successful futures, but Crafts then turns to an astronomical metaphor, naturalizing failure as a law of the cosmos. In thus obscuring the human experience of failure (both individual and systemic), this figurative turn casts failure as a form of social engineering, helping men find their "true place." Such rhetoric appeals to the overlapping audiences of success manuals, which addressed workers and managers at the same time, and it also frames failure as a scientific process—inherent in bodies to differing degrees.

A condition of the body, male failure in nineteenth-century success manuals is equated with femininity—some men might be from Mars but "too light" in the loafers to stay put there. Commensurately, historians of masculinity have found that as middle-class work became increasingly less physical near the end of the nineteenth century, the gendered language around professionalization paradoxically intensified,<sup>6</sup> and success and failure became a gendered dyad. The word "failure" derives from the Old French *faillir*, meaning to lack, to miss, or to be found wanting, and in its customary opposition to "success"—with that word's connotations in genealogical "succession"—failure thus implies fundamental privations not limited to career success. While the protagonist of success ideology



was invariably white and male, the consequences of nineteenth-century failure were often suffered by women and people of color. But despite its undesirability as an outcome, failure appears in success rhetoric as a necessary starting point. People *need* a little early failure to succeed. Indeed, it is precisely by often returning young men to feminized spaces of domestic care that early failure ideally spurred them to seek masculine achievement that much more urgently.

In the nineteenth century, failure functioned paradoxically as one of the “punishing norms” Halberstam writes against in making the case for a “queer art.” The social Darwinist positioning of failure as a measure of occupational fitness, for example, depends on the existence of straight white men as successful exceptions. As Orison Swett Marden, editor of *Success* magazine, lists the great men who failed early on because they landed temporarily in “misfit occupations” (Galileo as a physician, Milton as a teacher, and Dickens as an actor), he speculates that “when misfortunes happen . . . they may be paving the way for great successes. Our failure may be due to our superiority” (1897, 98). At the end of the nineteenth century, the conditional framing of passages like this pointed to the precarity of countless American lives, just as the “superiority” that might ultimately be clarified by means of temporary failure was often associated with whiteness and masculinity. Even white men, however, experienced failure as an interpretive problem. The rhetorical gambit of redeeming failure covered for a nineteenth-century American social landscape littered with failures. How could one know whether to find a new occupation, or simply to try harder? Was failure caused by spiritual limitation or physical ones? These questions would necessarily remain unanswerable for people in cycles of economic failure—which is to say, a vast majority of the American population.

In *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Scott Sandage elaborates the premise that “failure pervades the cultural history of capitalism” (2005, 9), pointing to the invention of a variety of institutional machineries for managing and recording failure, such as bankruptcy courts, credit-rating agencies, and charitable organizations. This administration of failure depended on the popular self-help philosophies that developed from the most urgent contemporary debates about the nature of the human. “In the culture of ‘intense individualism’ that emerged after the Civil War,” Sandage writes, “success and failure—not slavery and freedom—became the quintessential American axis” (2005, 251). As success manuals theorized the nature of success and failure, if freedom and slavery were native, bodily conditions, then perhaps so were success and failure. In this



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way, in accounting for the fate of individuals success rhetoric thus set aside the role of large-scale market forces and vertically integrated corporations, as well as of ideological formations like racism and sexism.<sup>7</sup>

To counter the confusion of living in a society defined by failure, some success advocates recommended cultivating failure-resistant habits of mind. The New Thought, a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritual movement, treated success and failure as functions of faith and attitude. "Courage begets success, fear begets failure," wrote Ralph Waldo Trine, one of the most popular exponents of the New Thought (1910, 144), and he recommended a strict program of meditation to banish negative thinking:

A simple effort to control one's thoughts, a simple setting about it, even if at first failure is the result, and even if for a time failure seems to be the only result, will in time . . . bring him to the point of easy, full, and complete control. Each one, then, can grow the power of determining, controlling his thought, the power of determining what types of thought he shall and what types he shall not entertain. . . . This is a case where even failure is success, for the failure is not in the effort, and every earnest effort adds an increment of power that will eventually accomplish the end aimed at. (1900, 3)

Where previous writers had posed early failure as ultimately useful, Trine cordons failure off in a mental space, built by cognitive practice—a circumscribed space of the mind that mirrored the idea of culture as conceived by artists and thinkers of the same period. Both sought a retreat from the encompassing, and reductively economic, opposition of success and failure.

## Modernism and failure

The American Renaissance writers had already begun to coopt failure in the 1850s. Of Hawthorne, Melville had famously written, "He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness" (1984, 1164). "Vivas to those who have fail'd!" Walt Whitman ebulliently added (1982, 205). By the end of the nineteenth century, bohemia had transformed anxiety about failure into a rallying cry. This attitude became an organizing principle for a cultural vanguard disgusted with what, in a 1906 letter to H. G. Wells, William James called "the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS" (1920, 260).



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Surrounded by the wrecks of failure at every turn, the moderns suspected that the mechanisms by which society decided success and failure were out of order. Joseph Freeman wrote of his days as editor at the *New Masses* in the 1920s: "We had begun to develop an idea common to nineteenth century romantics and twentieth century bohemians, the idea that success was synonymous with philistinism. . . . Unable to distinguish between success and conventional standards of success, we made a cult of failure" (quoted in Leuchtenberg 1993, 146–47).

The literary culture of the early twentieth century began to elaborate on failure in a myriad of ways: the wrecked careers of characters in Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway; the ambient dread and discordant syntax of Eliot and Pound; and the perpetual appearance of little magazines trumpeting cultural revolutions, only to disappear months later. Failure thus became a style that tested the comprehension of audiences for modernism. And as modernist intellectuals bore witness to a history of failure, they also worried about the adequacy of their response, about the likelihood of art's failure to reflect, engage, or help to remedy life. What oppositional effect could an "art of failure" have on a society seemingly defined by failure? If art became a "cult of failure," was it really so different from the "bitch-goddess SUCCESS" it sought to escape? Did failure really offer the possibility of escaping the totalizing economic logic of success?

Gertrude Stein makes an especially apt example of the modernist engagement with failure, failing in Halberstam's queer sense to conform to late nineteenth-century gender norms at nearly every turn. Stein's "failures" follow shifting ideas about women's conduct, as she failed to follow through on her plan to become a doctor, and thus a professional New Woman.<sup>8</sup> Even her decision to go to Europe to become a writer and art collector was also at first a failure. In the 1930s, when she attracted a broad American audience, she became an outspoken commentator on the idea of failure in American life, and lately scholars (including, in passing, Halberstam herself) have begun to wrestle with Stein's own failures from this period—especially her faltering political judgment and rear-garde ideas about race and gender.<sup>9</sup>

For a variety of reasons, then, it makes sense to see Stein's commitment to "beginning again and again" (1998a, 525) as a kind of commitment to failing again and again. In the early fiction, this failure involves economic privation, ethnic and gender identity, and more performative matters of comportment. *Three Lives* (1909) narrates the impoverishment of its main characters, all ethnic women, as failures. "Melanctha" centers on the fate



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of a hedonistic young African American woman who falls in love with the upwardly mobile Dr. Jefferson Campbell, and the narrative largely consists of conversations between the two as they worry over the possibility of failure. Telling Melanctha, "I ain't got any use for all the time being in excitements and wanting to have all kinds of experience all the time. I got plenty of experience just living regular and quiet and with my family, and doing my work, and taking care of people, and trying to understand it. I don't believe much in this running around business and I don't want to see colored people do it" (1998a, 148), Campbell offers a colloquial version of the ideology of racial uplift, which promised that black assimilation to white Victorian modes of conduct would encourage white elites to grant African Americans full access to citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Here, Stein has Campbell adopt Progressive and Jamesian terminology of habit, disavowing "excitements" in favor of "work, and taking care of people," even as his repetition of "all the time" signals anxiety about the totalizing discipline of respectability. Struggling to maintain his austere professionalism while allowing himself the pleasures of Melanctha's wanton lifestyle, Campbell hedges and qualifies: "I don't believe much."<sup>11</sup>

Melanctha responds to her lover's prescriptions with a withering critique:

I certainly did wonder how you could be so live, and knowing everything, and everybody, and talking so big always about everything, and everybody always liking you so much, and you always looking as if you was thinking, and yet you really was never knowing anybody and certainly not being really very understanding. It certainly is all Dr. Campbell because you is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy, and it certainly do seem to me Dr. Campbell that it certainly don't amount to very much that kind of goodness. (154)

Here, Melanctha's insistent gerunds agitate against the practice of dogmatic uplift ideals "all the time," and the repetitive prose rhythms mimic the pull of temptation. Puncturing Campbell's fragile self-regard, she points to his fears—"You is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy"—and posits a "goodness" more pliantly consistent than Campbell's rigid masculine purity. With "Melanctha," as Michael North suggests, "the shift of race seemed to make it easier for Stein to see the senses, even the body itself, as ruled by convention" (1998, 70). Despite Melanctha's tragic end, Stein did not commit her career to exploring the psychological effects of racial capitalism. Neither did she revise her stereotypical sense



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of black womanhood as hypersexual. She did, however, expand on the correspondences among language, habit, and more ideological conceptions of success and failure. In Parisian bohemia, Stein sought the freedom to pursue the positive effects of failure represented in "Melanctha" without suffering the consequences of racial, sexual, and economic repression.

A number of critics have focused on how in Stein's work alternate forms of domesticity were elaborated in her recondite language games.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that in such games she also consistently played with the grammar of American bootstrapping and the public, implicitly masculine culture of success manuals. For instance, in the short piece "Studies in Conversation" (1927), Stein dismantles an old cliché: "Practicing, practice makes perfect. Practicing, perfect, practicing to make it perfect. Practice, perfect, practice. As perfect. Practice. Perfect. Practice" (1973, 124).<sup>13</sup> The stuttering repetition sounds like a person trying, and failing, to memorize the motto, while deforming the little cliché draws attention to nominals, making liberal perfectionism visible in a grammatical trick. But how else does practicing work? The original cliché, "practice makes perfect," conceals the messiness of the process: practice is not itself perfect. Casting practice as a series of failures, the passage thus performs failure as the key to success. Here, and elsewhere, Stein does the nineteenth-century American apostles of success one better—enacting in grammatical experiment what their blithe prose can only prescribe.

Stein's work in this vein persistently questions many of the elements of mainstream self-help's discourse. In "An Instant Answer or a Hundred Prominent Men," a 1922 piece later collected in *Useful Knowledge* (1929), she mimics self-help's pretenses to scientific accuracy: "I will select a hundred prominent men and look at their photographs hand-writing and career, then I will earnestly consider the question of synthesis" (1998a, 479). Stein never makes good on this promise—there are no photographs or handwriting, for instance—and the pretense to scientificity, drawn from her beginnings in psychological and medical research, as well as in naturalist fiction, is subverted by presenting her findings with a kind of mock-Barnumesque flair.<sup>14</sup> Stein also ignores a number of the self-help genre's formal requirements. She withholds the names of her subjects, diminishing their ostensibly exemplary character by referring to them only numerically, and also does away with realistic, causal narrative structure, subjecting the narrative and psychological language of upward mobility to playful tinkering: "The thirteenth has not neglected the zenith" (480). In this oddly mathematical context, the men seem unsexed, deracinated, and disembodied.



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Throughout "An Instant Answer," Stein plays on gender as an aspect of self-making: "The twenty-first nursed what was to him becoming" (481). In standard self-help mythology, early failure results from familial disruption, but in the absence of a nurturing home life successful men learn to "nurse" themselves. Stein inverts this premise, suggesting that the men's "success" might lead to gender inversion: "The twenty-fifth is moderately a queen. What did you say. Anger is expressive and so are they." The self-help manual, usually a repository of compulsory gendered behavior, becomes a record of explosive gossip in what Marianne DeKoven calls Stein's "voices style" (1983, 85), as disjunctive syntax de-links economic success from gendered and raced behavioral codes. Instead of the clear-cut equations of habit and success or failure, the reader finds critical, recursive assertions: "The fifty-fourth one is the one that has been left to study industrialism. No one asks is there merit in that. No one says is there something noble in that" (Stein 1998a, 485). These questions, presented here but absent from the public conversation, target the means-ends rationality of American education, from the archly ironic vantage of European bohemia. In this way, Stein's contribution to a critique of hegemonic masculinity here relies on her location outside American public discussion ("no one asks") and on the anonymity of the men (who might otherwise take offense).

Excluding the men's names points toward the formulaic discourse central to self-help biography, suggesting that the men are reproducible, serialized instead of exceptional. One of them anxiously needs people to hear the story of his success:

The seventieth come again and listen were the origin and the beginning of his success. Come again and do not go away. Come again and stay and in this way he succeeded. He was successful. Have you meant to go away he would say. Oh no indeed he meant to stay they would say. And he meant to stay. He was successful in his hey day and he continued to be successful and he is succeeding to-day. (487)

The titular "instant answer," in the seventieth man's case, is the telling of his story—"come again and listen were the origin and beginning of his success"—as Stein suggests that the reiteration of successful men's stories itself constitutes their success. The imperatives demand that the reader "stay" at the site of storytelling, here coded as maternal, domestic, and pedagogical, and underlining this context are the rhymes that evoke children's books (way, stay, away, day)—the memorable formulae



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of recitative education. By its end, "An Instant Answer" has made the men's multiplicity a joke on the reproduction of success: "One hundred and won. When this is done will you make me another one" (492). At every turn, the piece queries the success manual's values of hard work, of conventional masculinity, and of straightforward language. At the same time, in reducing self-help biography to its formal components, and trying thus to make it fail, Stein actually accomplishes what success manuals purport to do but cannot: make illuminating generalizations about success. With her syntactic idiosyncrasies, however, Stein also ensured that her work would, for a time, remain inaccessible to the kind of audiences nineteenth-century success manuals sometimes found.<sup>15</sup>

## Stein's success, the Depression, and nineteenth-century individualism

For decades, Stein wrote for small groups of initiates, who sometimes themselves struggled to understand her experiments: "Nobody knows what I am trying to do but I do and I know when I succeed" (1954, 365). But with the popularity of *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) she abandoned this monkish posture for the role of a modernist public intellectual, taking her ideas about the American "cult of failure" to a mass audience. In an interview about the memoir, for example, Stein reflects on her conversations with the Parisian visual artists, then much more economically successful than her: "One of the principal things that I have quarreled with them about was once they have made a success they became sterile, they could not go on. And I blamed them, I said it was their fault. I said success is all right but if there is anything in you it ought not to cut off the flow not if there is anything in you" (quoted in Mellow 2003, 338). Associating recognition and reward with sterility, Stein here cuts against hetero-reproductive framings of success, and in the flush of her own success she famously honed a public persona that carefully sidestepped the question of her own sexuality. She also sought broader applications for the ideas about success and failure she had long incubated in bohemia, as in the lecture "Portraits and Repetition" (1935), where Stein arrived at a conviction that sounds straight out of a success manual and turns the interior experiments of the earlier work toward US nationalism: "I am certain that what makes American success is American failure" (1998b, 291). Despite its ostensible "certainty," this conclusion begs a number of essential questions. Whose success does whose failure



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make? Does failure produce success within individuals, psychologically? Does one have to know failure to also know success, dialectically? Or does one need failure to stay motivated, as she tells Matisse? Why is gender elided entirely? Where in America does this process take place? Is she referring to a particular aspect of American political economy? Does she mean to respond to the Depression? Does she mean to imply the logic of scarcity—that success can only happen at the expense of failure: “one man’s loss is another man’s gain”?<sup>16</sup>

In her first major work after the *Autobiography*, Stein works through these questions by returning to the nineteenth-century ideal of the self-made man. *Four in America* (1947) consists of four counterfactual biographies, recasting key figures of American history in occupations they never took up: Henry James as a war general, George Washington as a novelist, Wilbur Wright as a painter, and Ulysses S. Grant as a religious leader. *Four in America* thus produces failure in the narratives of otherwise successful exceptions. In contrast to the conventional success advocates cited above, Stein does not assert that great men have learned from or been motivated by failure. Instead, she writes their success out of their lives, testing their mettle in hypothetical contexts, and blithely insisting that they would all still have achieved greatness in these other walks of life. That the book did not find a publisher until after Stein’s death is not the least of its ironies as a document of the national mythology of success.<sup>17</sup>

The discussion of Grant takes off from the confusion around his name. Grant’s given first name was Hiram, which he discarded as a young man, and he later acquired the middle initial S through a mistake in the nominating process at West Point, where the cadets also gave each other nicknames, a few of which Stein runs through: Sam Grant, Uncle Sam Grant, United States Grant, and Unconditional Surrender Grant. She herself calls him Hiram, an Old Testament name that in the 1930s would have associated the general with Jewishness, though Stein proclaims with her typical confidence: “If he had remained Hiram Ulysses, as he was born, would he have been ultimately successful. I am unable to doubt it” (1947, 3).

Grant’s American religion has the itinerant status of a “camp-meeting,” and Stein worries that this might interfere with his success: “A real American a true American cannot earn a living. If he could earn a living he could be waiting. Waiting is what makes earning a living be part of existing and succeeding. No American can succeed no American can earn a living. . . . He cannot wait and therefore he cannot earn a living and therefore he cannot succeed” (1947, 16). In this view, the stereotypical



restlessness of American life precludes the possibility of success, just as the rootlessness of pioneer religion troubles the certitude of the Protestant ethic, a point Stein simplifies in *Everybody's Autobiography*: "I used to be fond of saying that America, which was supposed to be a land of success, was a land of failure. Most of the great men in America had a long life of early failure and a long life of later failure" (2004, 88). Following the model of great men, she suggests, means throwing yourself into crushing failure, sometimes again and again. Such "beginning again and again," or failing again and again, relies on faith, just as does the success ideology Stein travesties so well. In her definition, success is an external judgment of a life always otherwise experienced as failure (the question of who constitutes a "real" or "true" American for Stein remains unanswered, but *Four in America* points toward her preoccupation with white masculinity).<sup>18</sup>

Restoring Grant's Old Testament name belies his 1862 General Order no. 11, what John Higham calls the "principal nativist incident of the war years" (2002, 13). In it, Grant attempted to dismiss all the Jews under his command, when he had come to believe that Jewish Union soldiers were secretly trading for cotton with Confederate Southerners. A few weeks after the order, Lincoln rescinded it, and Grant would offer apologies and excuses over the years, not least during his presidential campaigns and after the publication of his own wildly successful memoirs. Despite the Order, participation in the war effort on the Union side helped German Jewish immigrants secure citizenship through military service, and though no one in her own family had fought, Stein herself would later claim: "I was always in my way a Civil War veteran" (1998a, 778).

As she points out, Grant cuts a miserable figure of success mythology by any measure. He had resigned from the US Army to avoid dishonorable discharge for excessive drunkenness, then failed as a farmer in Missouri, and so, in 1860, moved his family to Galena, Illinois, to help his father and brothers at the family's tannery. Galena has taken on a mythic quality in stories of Grant's life—a frontier purgatory in which the military genius awaited his ascension to greatness. After the war, Grant went on to fail again, first through the corruptions of his presidency and in late life the speculations that brought his family to financial ruin. For Grant, the myth of a purgatorial Galena functions like her textual domesticities do for Stein, so that, in time and again drawing on its potential energies, he is, in Stein's terms, "beginning again and again," and, in the language of American bootstrapping, his "success" appears as a Steinian masterpiece: unrecognized in its moment, ugly to its contemporaries, implicitly masculine, and a sublime object of historical fascination to later generations.



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In the early 1930s, Thornton Wilder wrote Stein from Galena, where he had taken a weekend away from his teaching job at the University of Chicago: "Wherever we are now, we your children, we carry your ideas about with us, finding a thousand corroborations in the life around us to those ideas as far as we are able to grasp them, that we call Recognition, Daily Life, Talking and Listening, Vitality and Sensitivity, and so many others. But Galena has above these a special reference to yourself and you know what that is" (Burns et al., 1996, 21). Wilder took his discipleship to Stein especially seriously, but other modernists too shared her interest in Grant. In *Tender Is the Night* (1934), F. Scott Fitzgerald twice compares his protagonist Dick Diver to Grant in Galena. Before the narrative properly begins, Diver appears "like Grant, lolling in his general store in Galena, ready to be called to an intricate destiny" (Fitzgerald 2003, 126). Diver's "intricate destiny" does not, however, mean victory in battle or the arts, as it might in Stein. Instead, he has a ruinous extramarital affair with a young actress and loses his loving and wealthy, though psychologically unstable, wife. At the end of the book the ex-wife wonders at Diver's fate, and recalls the comparison to Grant: "Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another" (315). Here Fitzgerald points up the absurdity of mythologizing Galena, framing Stein's idealized view of the place against a hysteric's wan hopes about her alcoholic ex-husband.<sup>19</sup> In spite of Stein's ironic modernist optimism, some people, even white men, do finally waste away in Galena or Hornell, their "beginning again and again" leading nowhere.

In Stein's usage, however, "Galena" functions, I suggest, as another name for "whiteness," or perhaps, "white privilege." It implies that, when one's experiments (temporarily) fail, one can rely on the security of the established family business (like the Midwestern frontier tannery for Grant). Stein and Wilder take the simple advantage of the Grant family's inherited capital for granted, and Fitzgerald suggests how the ritualized intonation of a purgatorial Galena covers for the protagonist's unredeemed failure. But Stein's African American contemporaries had their own views of the landscape of failure, stretching from the Civil War into the twentieth century. Sterling Brown, in the persona of a white Southern woman, famously glossed Harlem nightlife as the "logical outcome of Appomattox" (1996, 169). The splendor of everyday African American culture in the urban North forces Brown's narrator to reflect on the failures of the



Confederacy. In comparison, Stein's hero-worship of Grant seems like a distraction from the vital historical concerns of the moment. African American writers of the period were also less likely to see their own failures as fodder for art. In Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a Depression-era postmortem on the aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance, Eustace, a queer singer, "wanted to branch out and entrance larger and more discriminating audiences than Harlem offered, but every attempt he made to get in a Broadway show, or arrange for a radio or concert audition, had ended in failure" (1992, 104)—but this "failure" results not from Eustace's lack of talent but from the culture of white supremacy. Like Stein, Eustace's "discriminating" taste is an expression of his queerness, his "resistance" to "norms of human development." Quite unlike Stein, however, Eustace has neither inherited wealth or an increasingly valuable art collection to rely on while his work goes unrecognized.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite every indication that the Depression stemmed from systemic problems, Stein consistently emphasized individual effort as its antidote. She wrote editorials against the New Deal in the *Saturday Evening Post* and, in the preface to *Brewsie and Willie*,<sup>21</sup> exhorted Americans to revive the "spiritual pioneer fight" (1998b, 778) that had conquered the frontier, and although literary and cultural historians tried to weigh such views against the contribution Stein made to twentieth-century aesthetics and queer culture, her views do parallel those of the 1930 pillars of the twentieth-century self-help canon: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). Like Stein's, though more sharply, Hill's work offers a warmed-over synopsis of nineteenth-century rugged individualism: "One of the most common causes of failure is the habit of quitting when one is overtaken by *temporary defeat*," he writes, observing that "every adversity, every failure, and every heartache carries with it the Seed of an equivalent or a greater Benefit" (1987, 3, 55).

In the decades since the Depression, cultural critics have distinguished Stein's attempt to rhetorically redeem failure from Hill's by focusing on her artfulness, on what she herself declared her genius. And her work has increasingly become an inspiration for experimental writing by American writers from a variety of marginalized communities. At the same time, however, other contemporary developments give reason to be less sanguine about new modernist studies notions of the art of failure.



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Now that the worker-as-artist serves as an ideal for an emergent “creative class,” it makes less and less sense to differentiate modernist, artistic failure from the failures of ordinary people. Such thinking does already underpin much historicist scholarship on modernism, but its polemical force in relation to the present has not yet been realized—not least because so many of the failures that presage success are still disproportionately experienced by white men, just as the nineteenth-century authors of success manuals imagined.

Discussions of failure in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were not so different than the one we are having now. Like contemporary theorists of “grit” and “resilience,” nineteenth-century philosophers of success knew failure was good for young people,<sup>22</sup> though they couldn't quite say how *much*. The American modernists, drilled on this message in their youth, found ways to amplify its hypocrisies, to use its rhetorical legerdemain as a tool of social critique. They found themselves unable, however, to escape the atmosphere of failure through aesthetic irony. Indeed, even their greatest successes came to feel like failure by other means. Stein's career thus follows a trajectory from the stunted critique of racial capitalism in *Three Lives* to the deep grammatical and psychological experiment in her middle period and, finally, to the conservative idealizing of individualism in the Depression, an echo of the nineteenth-century success manuals' worst lies. That trajectory suggests that the rewards of celebrating failure as an art may not sufficiently ensure against the risks of celebrating a culture of failure. Her career thus demands we pay more attention to discriminating among the implications of the term “failure”: failure as a category, an experience, an affect, a person, an economic condition, a temporary state, and a final one. Sure of herself as a failure, obsessed with success, and an archly alienated insider, Stein left behind aesthetic experiments that sound out the busted promise of success rhetoric. Though we may sometimes hear in her work a resonant solidarity with failures across time, space, and forms of trauma, “the mother of us all” (1998b, 788) knew many of her children were doomed.

## §

Matt Sandler directs the MA program in American studies at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University. His work has appeared in *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, *Comparative Literature*, *Journal of American Studies*, and elsewhere. He is completing a book about African American poetry and the Romantic movement.



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## Notes

1. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno stresses the contradiction of “art’s double character as both autonomous and *fait social*” (1997, 5).
2. In the American context, Andrew Ross (1986) and Suzi Gablik (2004) also offer early examinations of modernism’s failures.
3. Among critical prompts for Halberstam’s work, a key one is Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2009), which returns to modernist articulations of unfulfilled forms of queerness as a foil to contemporary normalizations of queer life. Martin Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution* (2006) takes a more formalist approach, following the history of the manifesto, from Marx and Engels onward, through its repeated failure to realize theory as practice.
4. For the role of “creativity” and “artistic critique” in new theories of management, see Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, and for an account of this phenomenon in self-help culture, see McGee 2005.
5. “Disidentification” is José Muñoz’s term, exemplified for him partly by Stein’s influence on Latino installation artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1999, 166).
6. See, for instance, Kimmel 2006, 57–124; Rotundo 1993, 194–221; and Bederman 1996.
7. Describing the importance of failure to the function of capitalism as bourgeois revolution, Marx and Engels write that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (1978, 476), and thus it leaves behind a stream of obsolete machines, ideas, entrepreneurs, and workers. Later, a contemporary of Stein, Joseph Schumpeter, named this aspect of capitalism “creative destruction” ([1942] 2008, 81–86).
8. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg demonstrates that the female modernists of the 1920s took advantage of educational, professional, and political advances made by late nineteenth-century feminists. “They *assumed* their right to exist outside of gender,” and so “the political solidarity of the successive generations of New Women slipped away as their discourses became more disjointed and conflicted” (1986, 296).
9. Barbara Will (2011) offers the definitive accounting of Stein’s relations to fascism. I discuss Stein’s disagreements with the New Deal below, along with



scholarly accounts of it. For useful accounts of Stein's celebrity, see Leick 2004 and Biers 2013. Finally, for Stein and genius, see Will 2000 and Perelman 1994.

10. For an account of racial uplift, see Gaines 1996. For uplift and masculinity in modernist African American literature, see Ross 2004.

11. For Stein and black culture, see Saldívar-Hull 1989, Blackmer 1993, North 1998, Peterson 1996, Smedman 1996, and Weiss 1998.

12. For my use of the Wittgensteinian term "language game," I rely on Marjorie Perloff's reading of Stein (1999, 83–114). Perloff takes interest in the question of domesticity in Stein but less so in its geopolitical echoes across the Atlantic.

13. The phrase "practice makes perfect" is customarily traced back to the vernacular Latin "*fabricando fit faber*" ("working makes the worker") and to the discussion of habit in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, an important source for Stein in *The Making of Americans* (1955). There, Aristotle points out that "we learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1926, II.1).

14. For an account of Stein and science, see Meyer 2002.

15. In "Literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke points out that success manuals themselves often bracket the experience of reading: "We usually take it for granted that the people who consume our current output of books on 'How to Buy Friends and Bamboozle Oneself and Other People' are reading as *students* who will attempt the recipes given. Nothing of the sort. *The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are succeeding*" ([1941] 1974, 298–99). For Stein's "illegibility" as a key feature of her work, see Dworkin 2003. For a reading of her difficulty in terms of "distant reading" and "women's work," see Cecire 2015.

16. Most accounts of the Depression agree that it stemmed from problems with the administration of abundance, not scarcity. For Stein and the period's economics, see Carson 1999.

17. Stein had enlisted Wilder and Van Vechten to circulate the manuscript of *Four in America*, as she tried in vain to find a publisher. It appeared posthumously in the Yale edition (1947) of her work. Fredric Jameson, following modernist studies' interest in modernist failures, has called the book an "unknown masterpiece at the very heart of Stein's work" (2007, 353).

18. This is one place we might recall Stein's apparently lifelong commitment to Otto Weininger's ideas about female masculinity. See Ruddick 1991 and Will 2000.



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19. Both Alan Trachtenburg (1968) and John Callahan (1972) comment on the mythic references to Grant in the novel.
20. Academic accounts of the Harlem Renaissance from the 1970s and 1980s, for instance by Nathan Huggins (1971) and Levering Lewis, parallel unforgiving scholarly positions on modernism from the same period by emphasizing the “failure” of the New Negro Movement to achieve what Lewis calls “civil rights by copyright” (1997, xxviii). My thinking also benefits from Robin D. G. Kelley’s (2003) discussion of failure, aesthetics, and black radicalism.
21. Michael Szalay (2000) and Sean McCann (2008) both associate *Four in America* with Stein’s reaction to the New Deal, and both compare her to Ayn Rand. Stein’s most explicit arguments with Roosevelt appeared in a series of pieces in the *Saturday Evening Post*, now collected in *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb* (1973).
22. For “grit,” see Duckworth 2016. For “resilience,” see James 2015.

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## Reviews

*Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, by Anthony Reed. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 280 pages.

Hollis Robbins

The recurring challenge for faculty designing survey or special topics poetry courses is choosing a good anthology. For African American poetry courses there are only three good options: Arnold Rampersad's *Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry* (2005), Michael Harper's *Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000), and Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* (1985). All are comprehensive collections, but each requires supplemental readings in key traditions and periods (spirituals, dialect, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts movement, post-civil rights era). I generally forego the poetry collections in favor of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which includes substantial scholarly apparatus and contextual materials, and assign supplementary critical readings such as Tony Bolden on innovation and funk, Joanne Gabbin on the black aesthetic tradition, Keith Leonard on formal poetry, Fred Moten on the black radical tradition, Michael North and Nadia Nurhussein on dialect, Howard Rambsy on the Black Arts Enterprise, and Lauri Ramey on slave songs and poetic innovation.<sup>1</sup>

Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* is a welcome and much needed addition to both African American poetry and experimental poetry syllabi. Reed argues that black experimental writing "challenges us to rethink the relationships between race and literary techniques" and to "rethink some of the prevailing assumptions surrounding experimental writing in particular" (4). He is correct that "current genealogies of 'avant-garde' or experimental writing in English tend to neglect black writing" (3). He is also correct that the "abstractness" of black experimental writing, its resistance to "preemptive understandings of black life," has resulted in the exclusion of experimental writing in standard genealogies of African American literature.

My hope was that *Freedom Time* would offer a strong and clear argument for inclusion, particularly for experimental black writing of



the 1960s when art, as Simon Gikandi reminds us, “had become a mode of calling into question the existing order of things” (2016, 13). Reed’s introduction offers a fine synthesis of the Melvin Tolson–Robert Hayden debate at the 1966 Fisk Writers Conference—a debate essential for anyone working in twentieth-century black poetry and grappling with the question of whether race indeed frames black poetry in advance. Reed explains and defines “racialized reading,” a practice that “provides a selective, occasionally prescriptive account of the project of black aesthetics as one of rejoinder, protest, or commentary, figuring black writing as reactive rather than productive” (7, 8). But at the level of his chapters—all of which offer smart and sustained readings of experimental works that challenge poetic expectations and address directly the question of how to represent visually, spatially, graphically, typographically, repetitively, allusively the often unspeakable, unrepresentable black experience—Reed does not quite do the work of political or poetic integration that he implies is needed.

For example, chapter 1, “Broken Witness: Concrete Poetry and a Poetics of Unsayings” reads Terrance Hayes’s “Sonnet” (2002), several works from 1970 and 1971 by the remarkable Umbra poet N. H. Pritchard, and several recent (2001) works by Caribbean Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philips to highlight Reed’s central claim that “experimentation is not coterminous with innovation that is tied to the protocols of individual or group genius but often entails repurposing, reinterpreting, and redefining older techniques, themselves made legible through multiple traditions” (33). The claim requires some understanding of the protocols and techniques of poetry and black poetry that are being repurposed by Hayes, Pritchard, Philips, and the other experimental writers featured in *Freedom Time*, but Reed doesn’t situate these protocols in a clear political context.

Moreover, Reed’s style is a disservice to the poets featured here. In the first chapter’s extended argument about “facticity” and “concreteness” in language, Reed writes that, “the phenomenality of words—their sublime visual and phonic physicality—suspends the poem between the textural and the textual, between worldliness and wordliness. Ineluctably, poetry temporalizes words: suspends them between the retention of past association and anticipation (what Edmund Husserl called the ‘pretension’ of new associations)” (31). While this observation is true and perhaps even smart, I cannot not call it helpful as a way of reading black experimental writing as such. What he describes may in fact describe all poetry and, if so, does not speak to the particular interventions of Terrance Hayes’s



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brehtaking “Sonnet,” offered three pages later. (For those who haven’t had the pleasure, the opening line, “We sliced the watermelon into smiles” is repeated thirteen times, with spaces after the fourth, eighth, and twelfth lines, gesturing toward the Shakespearean rather than the Petrarchan sonnet form.) In making the case so strenuously for “Sonnet” as a concrete poem, Reed limits the poem’s deliberate engagement with tradition (including avant-garde poetry and the black sonnet tradition), wrongly suggests that the choice of form is arbitrary, and does not seem to see that Hayes’s sonnet is wickedly *funny*.

Subsequent chapters are equally enlightening and infuriating. Chapter 2, “Establishing Synchronisms: Sycorax Video Style and the Plural Instant” offers readings of works spanning three decades, from the mid 1970s well into the twenty-first century, by the great Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite. The chapter engages robustly with “Sycorax Video Style (SVS),” Brathwaite’s innovative graphic poetics, which involve symbols and bold, oversized typefaces for works utilizing apocope, syncope, and other figures of cutting and expanding. Reed suggests that Brathwaite’s “emphasis on language as a medium through invocation of other media and through the active morphing of language tropes, calls into question the capacities of language and literature” (79). (In its own brief treatment of Brathwaite’s work, Gikandi’s essay, with its remarkable clarity on the relationship of poetics and politics during the Black Arts era, provides a model for writing about poetry that Reed might well seek to emulate.) Chapter 3, “Between Now and Yet: Postlyric Poetry and the Moment of Expression,” engages with the “postlyrical poetics” of Claudia Rankine and Douglas Kearney, offering readings of works from 2004 to 2009 that “bind poetic subjectivity to contemporary events and media through allusion” (100). Reed draws on Rankine and Kearney because in works that seek to disrupt “the assumed solidarity of the speaking, universal ‘I,’” each poet “gives the lyric voice to those whose mundane experiences do not register as worthy: the materializing ‘I’ is given to those whose lives ‘can not matter’” (99). Chapter 4, “Sing It in My Voice: Blues, Irony, and a Politics of Affirmative Difference” analyzes “an aspect of the blues” in several poems by Harryette Mullen (ranging in date from 1995 to 2002) and playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’s remarkable early work *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *The America Play* (1994), and *Venus* (1996) to argue that “an abstracted set of techniques most associated with the blues provides a platform from which to extend the expressive



range of black writing” by refusing “reference to some transcendental signifier to anchor or resolve the play of meanings” (135–36). Chapter 5, “Exploding Dimensions of Song: The Utopian Poetics of the Cut” focuses on Nathaniel Mackey’s orphic poetics, connecting music to “an ecstatic loss of self” and involving repetition and reiteration that “allows for a temporal logic similar to that of the phonographic record” (172). One always feels the deliberate incompleteness of Mackey’s poetry, the temporal instability; here at least, Reed’s explications are smart and enlightening.

Reed defines experimental writing not once but several times throughout the volume. Experimental writing seeks “through form to expand the range of the thinkable and sayable . . . one way of responding to the presumed conjunction of race and expression” (19). It refers not to method or technique but rather to “expanding the range of the thinkable by calling into question those ideological presuppositions that ‘everyone knows’” (171). Broadly, experimentation involves combinations of elements such as repetition, spacing, musicality, and “graphicity” that enable the poet to broaden the reach of a work.

One way to approach the texts featured in *Freedom Time* is to state what is obvious at first glance as one leafs through its pages: all are designed to startle visually. Some of the pieces appear disorganized or chaotic, some involve crossings out or startling punctuation, some involve strange kernings, as letters are squished together or pulled apart. Bold and alien typefaces occur. Lines might be repeated more than expected. Words are made to mean different things than expected by their placement. Nothing is expected. An aesthetic of deliberate unrecognizability prevails. Reed insists that such “experimental techniques” and race are mutually constitutive. “Black experimental writing . . . describes both the formally innovative writing practices of black writers and the ways that such writing transforms our understandings of race” (9). In other words, for Reed, the innovations or techniques used by black writers are never raceless. Black experimental writing announces itself visually on its own terms, and those terms are black.

*Freedom Time* is best when it focuses on specific poems. With a careful eye Reed analyzes works in painstaking detail—why they are the way they are; how (and why) they defy, subvert, elude, transgress, expand, and defy expectations. The writers and works he focuses on deserve to be read and read seriously; his key contribution is in making sure they are.



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What does anyone write poetry or criticism for but to give voice to or make sense of something? Yet not all of Reed's critical framing is helpful. Too often he unnecessarily complicates his project by jumping from author to work, to critical practices, to theoretical paradigms, to "standard views," and to literary-historical context in ways that obfuscate his train of thought. He begins by situating *Freedom Time* in "our era of official 'color blindness,'" yet his use of quotation marks signals his own skepticism about the idea. Certainly in hindsight this opening gambit is ill advised, though understandable—Reed needs to argue for the robust presence of color, of blackness, and must therefore present the argument for erasure. But color blindness isn't about the attributes of color but about the effects of not-seeing, and in a book about seeing experimental black poetry and about understanding the project of writers who see clearly, beginning with "color blindness" starts a train of argument that is more complicated than it needs to be. It would be good if Reed's arguments were made more simply because they are generally good arguments.

However, much of *Freedom Time*'s prose is opaque, gnomic, and exhausting; I fear that in assigning chapters, parsing his sentences will take up more discussion time than the works themselves. For example, in chapter 4, which includes readings of Harryette Mullen's and Susan-Lori Parks's experimental works, Reed writes that "the affirmative category of blues irony—undermining the closure of concepts—performs the labor of desedimenting the conceptual bases of thought, for example, about the meaning and value of the vernacular" (138). He has already defined blues "as an adjective—a set of techniques, including repetition and citation in addition to irony, that have no meaning on their own" (136). In this chapter and throughout the book, he employs the usual geological terms that lend themselves to poetic analysis—"terrain," "destabilize," "embedded," "undermining," "central element," "groundless," and "fundamental." But "desedimenting" stopped me short, not simply in confusion about the metaphor itself but also in regard to what it would mean to "desedimentize" a conceptual basis of thought. The entire paragraph, with its long detour through Adorno, jazz, and Ann Douglass's reference to "earthly liberation," promises excitement but ultimately fails to deliver any new understanding of what is interesting about Mullen's or Parks's experimental engagement with the blues tradition. Those interested in Mullen and Parks would be better off skipping forward to the readings themselves.



Certainly Reed's project of fitting black experimental poetry into the genealogies of African American poetry and experimental poetry is ambitious and requires addressing fundamental questions about categorization. What is poetry? What is experimentation? What is a doubly hyphenated poetics? How do black poets balance the particular and the universal? What is the expectation that works by black writers will be both singular and exemplary? Why are there different expectations for the negotiation of the particular and the universal for black writers? Why do we continue to think genealogically about black poetry? Where does experimentation begin in any genealogy? What accounts for trends in writing, critiquing, and anthologizing? (Intersectionality's influence has put even more pressure on anthology politics.) These are questions that scholars of black poetry grapple with as a matter of course. I had hoped these questions might be addressed more clearly by *Freedom Time*.

I might add one more question: why mention George Herbert but not Paul Laurence Dunbar, who is sadly nowhere to be found in *Freedom Time*? In a text that muscularly pushes back on so many "standard" views it is curious to see Reed state that dialect "is a mode of self-referential vernacular invention that purports to record language as it is used, from the vantage point of (and for) those who do not use language that way" (69). While he draws on Michael North to situate dialect in language standardization wars and hints that dialect is about freedom and originality in avant-garde practices, his argument would benefit from an acknowledgment of Dunbar's dialect innovations, which have been the subject of important recent reconsideration by Nurhussein and others.

The prevailing tendency of critics, Reed argues, "to approach black literature exclusively through the thematics of race or the social narrowly conceived, is one factor that has persistently led to the exclusion of the authors considered throughout this book and other black experimental writers from genealogies of presumptively white avant-garde writing, on the grounds that its concerns seem insufficiently 'universal'" (7). *Freedom Time* has already begun fighting back. Reed has done significant work in focusing critical attention on important works that need to be brought into conversation with "standard" works in the canon of black poetry, including, of course, Dunbar.



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Hollis Robbins is director of the Center for Africana Studies in the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University and chair of Humanities at the Peabody Institute. Robbins has edited or coedited five books on nineteenth-century African American literature; the latest is *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers* (Penguin), coedited with Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2017). She is currently completing a monograph, *Forms of Contention: The African American Sonnet Tradition*, under contract with University of Georgia Press.

## Note

1. See Bolden 2004; Gabbin 1999; Leonard 2005; Moten 2003; North 1994; Nurhussein 2013; Rambsy 2013; Ramey 2008.

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*Irish Cosmopolitanism: Location and Dislocation in James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, and Samuel Beckett*, by Nels Pearson. University Press of Florida, 2015 (paperback 2017). 179 pages.

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Nels Pearson opens *Irish Cosmopolitanism* with an acknowledgment of the paradox embedded in his title: how can we speak of a particular, national variety of cosmopolitanism when cosmopolitanism makes claims for the affiliation of human beings as an inclusive, transnational community? What makes it possible for Pearson to speak or write of an “Irish Cosmopolitanism” is a series of developments in the discourse on cosmopolitanism dating back to the end of the last century. At that time, commentators in a variety of fields, including many dedicated to postcolonial studies, began to question the simple opposition between “national” and “global” experiences and to assert a more nuanced awareness of the relationship between a familiar homeland and the broader world, between cultural specificities and universal sympathies. Despite its more limited scope, *Irish Cosmopolitanism* takes its place alongside field-defining studies of literary cosmopolitanism from this period, such as Jessica Berman’s *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (2001), Rebecca Walkowitz’s *Cosmopolitanism Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (2006), and Mariano Siskind’s *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (2014), which have addressed the transformation in ways of writing about local and global affiliation in the twentieth century. As these books indicate, the transnational turn in the new modernist studies involves an examination of how colonial writers respond to the influence of imperialism around the world and of the role of cultural nationalism in staging anti-imperial resistance. Pearson’s study contributes to another important direction in this transnational turn with his exploration of new models for cosmopolitan community that link local concerns to global contexts.

What makes Pearson’s contribution to the study of cosmopolitanism distinctive, of course, is the other term in his title—Irish. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, along with the somewhat lesser-known Elizabeth Bowen (each of whom commands two chapters in this study), are writers of unquestionable international standing, who spent much of their careers



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living abroad in a variety of European capitals. They nonetheless retained a certain affiliation, however conflicted or attenuated, with Ireland and its vexed history of colonial occupation, nationalist agitation, hard-won independence, and state building. This is not to say that, before their various departures, their connections with Ireland were somehow stable, that this history was somehow complete, but that their relationships with this history remained always in process, never entirely settled or certain. No doubt this sense of being unsettled is to be found at the source of much of the writing we call modernist, but for Pearson the colonial contexts of Irish modernism are crucially related to how these writers imagine the world beyond those contexts. In other words, Joyce, Bowen, and Beckett share a set of unsettling historical contingencies that bind them together as “Irish.” Neither their life stories nor their creative work comprise linear narratives from national belonging to global affiliation; rather, they demonstrate “a rigorous, nonhierarchical, and mutually transformative interplay of national and global consciousness” (20). Each writes with a cosmopolitan sensibility that simultaneously, not sequentially, pursues some form of local or national belonging and calls on a sense of transnational humanity in an environment that is always contested and contingent. Viewing “expatriate Irish modernism” in this way allows Pearson to harness postcolonial responses to the concept of cosmopolitanism that have questioned its rush to abstract universalism and global unity, while moving beyond postcolonial assessments of Irish modernism that tend to focus intently on contexts of nationalism or anticolonialism at the expense of attention to forms of transnational connection, experience, and consciousness.

In this regard, Pearson’s book can be viewed as a response of sorts to Walkowitz’s groundbreaking study, which begins with the question, “What does it mean, today, to be a British novelist, or even an English writer?” (2006, 1). Over the course of six chapters—on Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, and W. G. Sebald—*Cosmopolitan Styles* demonstrates just how flexible those terms of national affiliation have become after a century that saw the dissolution of the British Empire, the mass migration of former colonial subjects to former imperial capitals, and the ever-increasing mobility of peoples within and between the United Kingdom and the Continent. Nonetheless, Walkowitz retains the term “British” because it serves to bind together a particular tradition of literary modernism, one that spans the



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twentieth century and a variety of transnational affiliations but participates in the ongoing project of "testing the protocols and boundaries of British culture" (28). The label remains useful precisely because it is contentious, allowing for an analysis of multiple places, languages, and periods suggesting alternative groupings that do not rely on the nation as a concept or category. For Pearson, expatriate Irish modernism presents a similarly useful category because it brings together a body of writing that challenges "presumed opposition between national location and global dislocation, historical rootedness and temporal displacement, the familiar terrain of tradition and the strange new world of the modern" (4). The writers examined in the study, he contends, do not generate a modernism out of some abstracted, ahistorical, or postnationalist form of cosmopolitanism, but from a continuous condition of statelessness that they experience both at home and abroad. In this sense, Irish cosmopolitanism is very much a form of irresolution but one that produces "a rigorously expansive, decolonial and democratic mind, for it involves scrutinizing the dislocations of modernity—alienation, transience, social uprooting, loss—from the standpoint of a preexisting, subnational or presovereign experience of those same kinds of dislocation" (18).

That Joyce plays an important role in both studies of cosmopolitanism should be no surprise. Earlier generations of critics and scholars viewed him as a key exemplar of international modernism, whose experiments in literary form had somehow lifted his writing out of the morass of Irish history and placed it on a universal aesthetic plane. Of course Joyce criticism took a decidedly more historicist turn in the 1990s, as scholars began to pay increasing attention to the myriad ways that his writing inflects the social and political conditions of late colonial Ireland. It is the tension between these two perspectives, these two critical traditions, that makes Joyce such an interesting case study for the contemporary scholar of literary cosmopolitanism. Both Walkowitz and Pearson draw on the insights of postcolonial theory and criticism in order to reconsider the national and international dimensions of his writing. But where Walkowitz focuses on Joyce's critique of British colonialism and Irish nativism, Pearson seeks to move the critical conversation beyond the national and nationalist concern with decolonization in order to examine how Joyce's brand of modernism participates in new ways of imagining the global. Thus, Walkowitz develops a chapter-long analysis of the "style of triviality" (60) that Joyce employed to contest the social attitudes of "acquiescence" and "cheerful decorum" (59) that both British colonialism and Irish



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nativism employed to fix Irish culture firmly in place. In chapter one of *Irish Cosmopolitanism*, on the other hand, Pearson pursues his investigation of the “Paradox of Irish Internationalism”: the seeming contradiction between the development of national culture in the movement toward decolonization and the obstacles this process throws onto the pathway toward international legitimacy and recognition. With attention to the many images of the Irish coastline found in *Ulysses*, as a site of departure, of transition, of commerce, the chapter makes a compelling argument for understanding the novel as a response to the condition of “being pulled between a potential world society and a contested colony not yet able to be absorbed equally into any imagined global community” (31). *Ulysses*, then, is a novel not just concerned with resistance to British imperialism but with the broader transnational project of Irish culture. This becomes evident for Pearson in the “Cyclops” episode of the novel, long the focus of postcolonial scholarship due to its repeated allusions to nativism, nationalism, and imperialism. For Walkowitz, the debate between Bloom and his fellow Dubliners in the episode is significant because it is trivial—that is, “it emphasizes vernacular, personal, and economic details, which Joyce uses to disrupt philosophical abstractions both of nationalism and of cosmopolitanism” (2006, 73). But for Pearson the verbal battle is important because it comprises “a layered, self-reflexive revelation of how deeply and pervasively the lack of democratic sovereignty impacts the global identity of the colonized” (29).

This line of thought is extended in a number of ways, many of them unexpected, in chapter two, which focuses on the interplay of silence and voice in Joyce’s writing, and especially in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In recent years, the novel’s innovative language has increasingly been read as giving voice to the silenced traditions of ancient Ireland, which had succumbed to the forces of British imperialism, and to silenced voices of both the sovereign artist and Irish womanhood. But this is not to say that these voices announce a new cosmopolitan identity. Rather, for Pearson, they are “an expression of the unresolved contradictions” among “gender, nation, and human universals that inhere in the effort to represent a developing, marginalized Ireland on the international stage” (43). This expression amounts to a form of “critical cosmopolitanism” because it refuses the tendency to rush colonial or postcolonial subjects onto the stage of some global multicultural community at the expense of an identity that is still in process, still emerging from its own complex historical circumstances. Again, a comparison with Walkowitz’s perspective



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is telling. Her notion of “cosmopolitan styles” emphasizes “the salient features of modernist narrative, including wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language” in the development of “a critical cosmopolitanism” (2006, 2) that denies epistemological privilege and heroic notions of progress. Joyce’s attention to the trivial poses a threat to such notions by refusing to separate the paltry and transient from more “serious” concerns about politics and history. Pearson’s focus, on the other hand, falls on “the act of breaking silence” (47) in Joyce’s writing, which he associates with both the effort to transcend narrowly national preoccupations in favor of a liberated national conscience and the possibility of hearing the voices of a subaltern population that has been too long subjugated and ignored. This double movement is for Pearson exemplary of Irish cosmopolitan writing, in its desire to speak for a suppressed or defaced national identity and, at the same time, to address a broader transnational set of concerns and a broader transnational audience of readers.

As both Walkowitz and Pearson demonstrate, it is on the level of form, as a register of shared affects and an engine of political critique, that literary cosmopolitanism is most significant—and *Irish Cosmopolitanism* does much to add to our understanding of how modernist innovations merge with transnational imaginings. Perhaps ironically, this is particularly true in the chapters on Elizabeth Bowen’s writing, which was long overlooked or downplayed in discussions of Irish modernism due to the pervasive sense that her prose was less innovative than that of her male modernist contemporaries. Pearson’s account, however, skillfully teases out the aesthetic novelties in Bowen’s style: “Sentences that are ostensibly meant to move the narrative forward by describing a setting, character, or event,” he shows us, “are also laced with suggestive, oddly weighted words and syntaxes that tease the reader’s mind into more abstract, conceptual registers” (63). This weighting often produces the effect of distorting the representation of time and space, so that the world of the text is destabilized in a manner that belies realism, as well as the subjective time and spatial form often attributed to high modernism. For Pearson, then, the example of Bowen’s style helps to disrupt the accounts of modernist style as an indicator of some mode of universalized cosmopolitan belonging that once dominated critical accounts of international modernism, and especially British modernism. Like Walkowitz, in other words, he identifies a critical capacity in modernist form that works to unsettle our sedimented notions about cosmopolitanism itself; but Pearson



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finds this capacity in a rather different set of verbal mannerisms, with a rather different array of political implications. For example, in *The Last September* (1929), a novel set during the Irish War of Independence, he provocatively reads Bowen's description of an encounter between her protagonists and a gunman in an abandoned mill as "rendered in strangely mixed idiom of elegy and nightmare," which summons up both Ireland's waning agricultural economy and its violent decolonizing present. This "disjunctive, but never universally abstracted" manner of approaching time and space, then, is the stylistic correlative to a cosmopolitanism that views Ireland as suspended "between assimilation into the generality of history and irreducible resilience" (76).

Bowen's writing is therefore exemplary of an expatriate Irish modernism that views the notions of home, origin, and belonging as radically contingent and perpetually suspended in a process that resists both fulfillment and nullification. Pearson's account of her "European novels," *The House in Paris* (1935) and *Heat of the Day* (1948), in chapter four develops this notion of a cosmopolitanism that resists the fixity of national identity, as the dislocated individual makes halting entries into more expansive international or transnational perspectives. In this way, *Irish Cosmopolitanism* provides an important supplement to readings of *The Heat of the Day* in recent studies of late or wartime modernism, such as Patrick Deer's *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Culture* (2009) and Kristine Miller's *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War* (2008), which focus on Bowen's deepening ambivalence about her class privilege and wartime mobility but also about official secrecy and British patriotism. At the same time, Pearson's study might be accused of underestimating the significance of the rather exceptional circumstances that allowed Bowen to travel unhindered between a devastated London and her familial estate in rural Ireland during the war. Pearson's reading of the novel highlights the uncertainty shared by Bowen and her protagonist about the status of both familial and national history, as Stella retreats to her Anglo-Irish Ascendancy property in County Cork from the unnerving modernity of the British capital. What this account seems to miss is the further ambivalence in Bowen's personal history, which surely inflected her cosmopolitanism, her *Irish* cosmopolitanism: the writer was granted the freedom to move between England and Ireland during the war because she had consented to pass intelligence about the Irish ruling class on to the British Ministry of Information.



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Pearson's study perhaps overlooks another opportunity when it moves on to a discussion of status of place and space in Beckett's writing, without providing a more explicit comparison with what has just been suggested about these categories in Bowen's novels. Due to their Protestant backgrounds, and despite their obvious privilege, both Dublin-born writers experienced a kind of marginalization as Irish public life was increasingly defined by Catholic and Gaelic interests after independence. But while Bowen developed her own idiosyncratic brand of novelistic realism, which Pearson sees as less committed to the depiction of abstract space and subjective time typical of British modernism, Beckett became well known for his increasingly spare and cartographically indeterminate settings. Acknowledging that this movement toward unnamed spaces has often been read by modernist critics as a movement toward cosmopolitan abstraction or universalism, Pearson again seeks to controvert the received wisdom about expatriate Irish modernism by asserting that this movement is always contingent and never complete. More recent postcolonial readings of Beckett's aesthetic of unnamings have suggested that it works as a politics of deterritorialization, which renders an imaginative cartography haunted by Irish history even as it opens up those spaces to a sense of estrangement that strains against the bounds of that history. Starting from these insights, Pearson's argument seeks to move toward new conclusions about Beckett's cosmopolitanism: his nouvelle "The Calmative" (1955), for instance, deals in both the investigation of abstract philosophical crises and the repetition of halting departures and failed returns that dramatize "the impossibility of negating a place one has yet to understand" (120). According to Pearson, it is precisely this push and pull between the philosophical and the historical around the postcolonial departure that generates Beckett's unique variety of cosmopolitan modernism, which refuses all forms of familiarity and reconciliation.

This distinctive quality of Beckett's writing, its unnamings of Ireland and the world, serves Pearson's thesis well. For it demonstrates an idea of world citizenship for those who are perennially displaced from their native land even when they are at home, and who thus "experience separation from home not as an estrangement but as an extension, or broadening out, of an alienation that already exists" (126). The final chapter of *Irish Cosmopolitanism*, which addresses Beckett's trilogy of novels written in the late 1940s, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*, explores the pervasive sense of disorientation in these texts brought on by the simultaneous inability of the narrators to comprehend either their home



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regions or the wider world as a “geo-social abstraction” (125). The novels can thus be read rather convincingly in terms of a “cosmopolitics” that denies the primacy of the ideas about the “human condition” in relation to “inquiries about our identity and belonging relative to place” (140). The crucial tableau here is one that appears as various afterimages in his writing but derives from his own biography: standing somewhere on the coast south of Dublin in 1945, looking out over the Irish sea, Beckett had an epiphany of sorts that led him to strip away what was knowable or recognizable or familiar in his art. This liminal position, on the same stretch of coastline where *Ulysses* opens, suggests to Pearson “the contradictions of Irish internationalism” (135) that combine “disorientation and estrangement” with “rootedness or provinciality” (134); it also hints at the alternative political geographies and alternative modes of belonging that John Brannigan associates with the coastal and oceanic, as opposed to the national or global, in his recent *Archipelagic Modernism* (2014). Like Brannigan and Nicholas Allen, who have sought to revise the histories of modernist writing from the North Atlantic archipelago in these terms, Pearson ultimately provides us with a model for understanding the conundrums of the national community and global affiliation that were so generative for expatriate Irish modernists: neither contentedly “Irish” nor serenely “universal,” their writing is “irreducibly situated between these two abstractions” (143). In developing this model, *Irish Cosmopolitanism* persuasively advances many of the more expansive perspectives of postcolonial studies, without adopting a fully postnational viewpoint, and thus offers an important contribution not just to Irish studies but also to the study of literary cosmopolitanism and modernism more broadly.

## §

Patrick Bixby is associate professor of English at Arizona State University, author of *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel*, and coeditor, with Gregory Castle, of *Standish O'Grady's Cuculain: A Critical Edition*. He is currently finishing a book on Nietzsche and Irish modernism and coediting, with Castle, *The Cambridge History of Irish Modernism*.

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## Late Decadent Modernism and the Great War: from the Romantics to the Nineties, Pound, Eliot, and Beyond

*Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, by Vincent Sherry. Cambridge University Press, 2015. 333 pages.

*John Paul Riquelme*

In his acknowledgments, the distinguished critic Vincent Sherry mentions having worked on *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* for a “decade and more” (ix). It is surprising that it did not take longer to produce this ambitious, wide-ranging, detailed argument for the importance of decadence (as a kind of writing and as a temporal attitude) to the history of literary modernism. The study is the most recent attempt by scholars (including prominently Harold Bloom) to place modernism in relation to Romanticism. Some have argued for continuities between Romanticism and modernism, while others see a sharp break. Sherry argues distinctively and revealingly that histories of literary modernism have been mistaken from early on because of the deleterious influence of Edmund Wilson, who traced modernism’s relation to late nineteenth-century Symbolist writing but ignored the connection to decadence from Baudelaire through the 1890s. Sherry draws our attention to the defects of Wilson’s influential view while arguing for a revisionary history of modernism based on continuities and extensions of decadent (that is, late, darkly Romantic) attitudes in modernism’s early years, through 1922. He deals extensively with the work of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot during those years, but also first with the writing of many others, starting with the Romantics. In addition, he suggests convincingly that decadent attitudes were confirmed by the horrors of the Great War in ways that triggered responses from modernists. Based on his previous writing about World War I, Sherry is well qualified to make that historically informed argument. His book’s working premise, general conclusion, and motivating principle are one: that new readings of modernism become possible with restored attention to decadent writing’s place in modernism’s rise and in light of the early twentieth-century events that turned key aspects of decadent thinking about culture into inescapable historical reality.

Those general orientations are salutary, as are some of the perspectives from intellectual history and some of the readings of literary texts that



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Sherry presents. He carefully notes the mention of decadence and decay in the works he discusses, and that attention is itself illuminating. He also regularly describes, often fluently, the texture of the poetic language that he cites as evidence. His best writing occurs in those passages, in which he is inspired virtually to sing. Some of the readings, however, are not wholly convincing, typically because of Sherry's selective and at times tendentious focus on details that he feels support his general orientations. His intense commitment to his argument results at times in overstatement about some of the evidence and its implications. Let me hasten to add that these local lapses affect only the persuasive force of some readings of specific works. The stronger portions of the study provide abundant evidence of decadence's importance in modernism's history. My other main hesitations about the argument, which I explain in more detail later, concern the use of the term *imaginary*, some exceptions I take to the handling of aspects of Eliot's prose and poetry in the book's closing chapter, the comparative absence and at moments mischaracterization of Oscar Wilde's attitudes and writings, and the neglect of gendered perspectives except abstractly (in Sherry's brief attention to queer theory). The book is illuminating, but its light creates some shadows that deserve to be explored. None of these hesitations affect the book's importance and the fact that it warrants attention for its well-grounded revisionist history of modernism's rise.

The book consists of nine sections: an introduction, four chapters, three interchapters (after chapters 1, 2, and 3), and a brief afterword. The introduction, "The Codes of Decadence: Modernism and its Discontents," provides an important corrective for Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931). With his heavy emphasis on modernism as a second wave of symbolism, Wilson influenced later critics, such as Frank Kermode and Hugh Kenner, who accepted symbolism and ignored decadence as significant for modernism's emergence. Sherry traces Wilson's views back to Arthur Symonds's displacement of decadence by symbolism, under William Butler Yeats's strong influence, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Using Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man on allegory as counters to Wilson, Sherry introduces temporality as an important concept that he develops further by turning to queer theory, specifically the work of Lee Edelman on a lack of futurity. The upshot is a presentation of decadence in its relation to modernism as temporally oriented in an antiprogressive way



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toward last days, or the condition of being after, which gives rise to "the temporal self-consciousness of modernism" (34). The chapters following the introduction focus primarily on English writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with an emphasis on poetry but also a significant, though selective, treatment of prose.

Chapter 1, "The Time of Decadence," presents attitudes toward time among the Romantics (poetry and prose) in relation to the French Revolution, especially William Wordsworth's notion of "spots of time," which decadent writing in the Victorian period loses faith in because of the experience of failed revolutionary expectations. After touching on De Quincey and Mary Shelley, Sherry turns to Charles Baudelaire, Karl Marx, and Edgar Allan Poe with regard to "temporal dispossession" and "a poetics of afterward" (63), the latter receiving more attention in a section on Poe, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and the villanelle in Ernest Dowson. The closing sections focus in considerable detail on Symonds and William Butler Yeats.

The interchapter, "The Cultivation of Decay and the Prerogatives of Modernism," includes a rich treatment of modernity against itself (the progress of modernity engendering doubts about what constitutes progress) in Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, and Bram Stoker, with attention to Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895). The early pages on Nietzsche make it clear that Sherry's perspective is heavily oriented toward Nietzsche's vision of European culture as double and antithetical, both Apollonian and Dionysian. Chapter 2, "The Demonstrable Decadence of Modernist Novels," focuses first on narratives of the historical present, specifically Henry James's *The Awkward Age*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, and G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, followed by consideration of two works with a political cast, Arthur Balfour's *Decadence* (a lecture of 1908) and C. F. G. Masterman's *The Condition of England* (1909). A later section deals with D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), and the closing section comments on Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). The discussion of elderly youth in James is congested, while the treatment of Conrad is too highly selective concerning the novel's various presentations of temporality. The Lawrence section is one of the strongest in the book, particularly with regard to the impact of the Great War and Lawrence's representations of degeneration. The discussions of Manning and West attend to temporal stalemate and to the soldier's dissociated mental state.



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The interchapter on “Imagism” argues for Imagism as an extension of decadence, with attention to the writings on poetry of F. S. Flint and T. E. Hulme before the War. Sherry’s commentary opens onto “the main line of development” in his account, which follows “the historical imaginary of last days” “to its climax and conclusion in the poems they [Pound and Eliot] wrote out of their historical experience of a catastrophic war” (173). Chapter 3, “Ezra Pound: 1906–1920,” emphasizes the Latinity of Pound’s interests and points back to the Latinity of decadent poetry, that is, its use of a Latinate vocabulary and Latin words, suggesting in Sherry’s view a conception of writing itself as belated in relation to voice. Readers aware of poststructuralist views, especially if they are committed to them, would want to hear more than Sherry provides concerning the comparative value of voice and writing mentioned here and elsewhere in the study. In this chapter and occasionally at other moments, Sherry refers to a “profounder modernism” (185) that he sees Pound developing, in which progress and degeneration are mutually implicated. I take that to be a modernism that includes the dual Nietzschean perspective mentioned above. In addition, Sherry’s descriptions extend to “the prosodies as well as the images of fall” (189); that is, he is concerned to establish a conceptual link between the formal texture of the language and the poems’ implications. Some of his descriptions of poetic language are wonderfully fluent. Besides bringing his knowledge of the Great War effectively to bear, Sherry deals suggestively with a mechanically inflected ballet and proposes a reading of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* that invokes intertextually a story by Max Beerbohm.

The third interchapter, “Reforming Decadence: Late Romanticism, Modernism, and the Politics of Literary History,” is difficult to describe and, for me, to understand. Sherry evokes within it Percy Shelley, Wyndham Lewis, György Lukács, and Theodor Adorno, among others. It includes what must be the longest paragraph with the longest quotation in the book (227–28) and some congested writing that I had difficulty following (224). Sherry refers at the end to a “tortuous history” (233) that should not be simplified. By reading the contrast in *Mauberley* between E. P. and Mauberley as a “narrative parable of the decadence onto which the sorrows of a failed revolutionary romanticism could be grafted,” Sherry brings us to a moment of “failure” that will “be turned into the orthodox and soon-to-be authoritarian economics of social credit” in Pound, with a parallel turn to orthodoxy in Eliot. I suspect that



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the study's inquiries stop with this moment in Pound and Eliot in part because dealing with it would require another book but also because the explanations for that turn are obscure. Sherry gestures at the enigma in a tortuous sentence about Poundians searching for the root of evil (229).

In Chapter 4, "T. S. Eliot: 1910-1922," Sherry makes a bold claim about Pound and Eliot that reverses the conventional wisdom that they outgrew decadent writing. Instead, he asserts "as strongly as possible that they matured into this sensibility" (235) and that they did so because of the Great War. That maturity for him comes in the poems in quatrains, which have been less discussed, especially formally, than Eliot's more famous writing before and after, and it comes in *The Waste Land*. He draws our attention beneficially to those quatrain poems and to the drafts of *The Waste Land*, to bring out, among other things, the place of *Dracula* in *The Waste Land* (more obvious in the drafts than in the final version). He is right about a late decadent sensibility under the high pressure of historical cultural disintegration yielding poetry of the most memorable kind. In general, however, because Eliot's poetry before 1922 includes, as Sherry admits, "extraordinary bizarreness" (270) and "enigmatic" (271) elements, I do not find his readings of individual poems compelling (though his remarks about the drafts often are). Sherry's formulations concerning connections to decadent attitudes throw some possible light on the published poems in quatrains, but the poems remain strange and elusive, and the references to the War that Sherry identifies may well not be there. For example, he claims that "Sweeney is a returning soldier" (257) based on slim evidence: an anecdote from Marshall McLuhan and a reading of the zebra stripes along Sweeney's jaw as caused by a military collar. He offers no supporting evidence that the stripes were commonly understood that way during the period. Eliot said quite different things about Sweeney than that he was a returning soldier (see Southam 1994, 93-94, a source that Sherry relies on elsewhere in the book). Sherry also tries to link the opening of part 2 of *The Waste Land* to Venice by citing a passage from James about Venice that he thinks is similar. I did not find the similarities strong enough to warrant the claim about Venice in *The Waste Land*.

The "Afterword: Barnes and Beckett, Petropi of the Twilight" points forward briefly and highly selectively from 1922 toward the further development of a post-World War I decadent sensibility in middle and late modernism. The mechanical aesthetics of interruption that Sherry



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highlights in the passage from Beckett is certainly in line with some of his earlier comments about pause in decadent temporality. Sherry also mentions lessening as an aspect of decadence earlier in the study. With that in mind, I would add that Beckett's minimalism is a highly abstract and formal equivalent of the state of being less. The word *petropus* from *Nightwood* that Sherry pluralizes in his title can reasonably be read as mock-Latin, as he proposes, considering the central male character O'Connor's self-proclaimed connection to Latin, though as Sherry notes it is neither Latin nor English. But another reading is possible, that the word is a mistake for *pteropus*, the genus name for a very large bat. The mention of twilight reinforces that possibility, which might take us in a jocoserious way to the vampire and *Nightwood's* place in a Gothic tradition. The appearance of Djuna Barnes at the end highlights the fact that there are virtually no female authors mentioned significantly in the study, only Mary Shelley and Rebecca West, discussed on fewer than a dozen pages. In Barnes, Sherry concentrates on the Doctor, who is a male crossdresser tied closely to Wilde, without mentioning the female late Modernist decadence of the lesbian characters, who pose a challenge to queer male Modernist decadence, that is, to the tradition of Wilde. Some acknowledgment of that lesbian dimension, as part of a dispute within the LGBT tradition, would have opened the possibility of a more gender-oriented reading here that would still focus on decadence. The study's chronological limits would also have made possible some consideration of Virginia Woolf's connections to decadence. She has often been linked to Walter Pater. It would not have stretched the limits significantly to spend time on *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which is in equal measure about a middle-aged woman and a returning soldier.

The term that Sherry uses most frequently is *decadence*, along with its adjectival form, *decadent* (often with related mention of decay, decline, and degeneration). The admirably detailed index makes it easy to find these words, but it has no entry for *imaginary*, which, because of its frequent mention, deserves both indexing and some defining theoretical discussion within the study, which is absent. The word occurs 104 times on 82 of the 287 pages that make up the body of the discussion. The following representative but highly selective list shows the range of his use of this key but undiscussed term: "poetic imaginary" (8, regarding *symbol*), "temporal imaginary" and "aftermath imaginary" (17), "new gender imaginaries" (24), "the cultural imaginary" (30), "the temporal



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imaginary of decadence" (repeated frequently, sometimes with "historical" or "chronological" instead of "temporal") and "of modernism" (33), "temporal imaginary of post-structuralism" (34), "ideal imaginary of time" (35), "temporal imaginary of revolution" (48), "Poe's special temporal imaginary" (64), "darker imaginary of *decadence*" (95, which Sherry says modernism claims as a "temporal imaginary" involving "the queering of the idealized times of futurity"), "global and historical imaginary" (122, referring to the "British Empire as a grand systemic organization"), "spatial imaginary" (130, in Chesterton), "the national imaginary of 1914" (163), "political imaginary" (211), "paratactic imaginary" (238, "Eliot's imperial imaginary" (248), "the language imaginary of 'Burbank'" (261).

Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Charles Taylor, among others, have used the term *imaginary* variously. Sherry uses it with multiple inflections but without placing them in relation to meanings already in circulation. The inflections cannot all be easily aligned conceptually. What constitutes an *imaginary*? It's a thorny question. Does that fact undermine in a significant way the persuasive force of Sherry's argument? I found the undefined, variable use distracting and puzzling because it raises questions regarding unspoken assumptions and implications. But even without a limiting, clarifying discussion of the term, the reader, or this reader, understands from the repetitions in their contexts that the most frequently occurring phrase, "the temporal imaginary of decadence," involves the notion that history is winding down, that empire is in decline, and that an ideal optimistic revolutionary sense of time has been displaced. In formulating that understanding, however, I find myself wanting a more explicitly delimited meaning conceptually for *imaginary*. Concerning the emphasis on *symbolism* in histories of modernism, Sherry rightly complains about "terms that are automatically applied" (20). He is open to a similar charge. A more parsimonious, systematic, and conceptually tactful use of *imaginary* would have improved the conceptual tightness of his argument.

Sherry refers to "Eliot's imperial imaginary" (248) late in the book. As much as I agree about Eliot's extending a literary decadent sensibility in response to World War I as a confirming event concerning final days, I find Sherry's attempt to identify a continuity in Eliot's thinking about empire unconvincing. He argues that two prose pieces separated by three decades show Eliot's unchanged attitude toward *unity* as a virtue of empire. They are "Romantic Aristocrat" (1919) concerning



## Review

George Wyndham (a review of a book by Wyndham) and an essay on Virgil (1951). Oddly, Sherry gives the title of the Virgil essay only in the notes, "Virgil and the Christian World," but the title is important for characterizing the essay's direction. He claims that Eliot's emphasis on the unity of Wyndham's mind is in line with what Eliot says about unity in the Virgil piece, but Eliot's statements and emphases do not support that claim. Concerning Wyndham, it is clear that Eliot is looking for something positive to say in order not to be dismissive of the author and his book. As a consequence, he states that Wyndham's life was all of piece, at home and abroad. Of more consequence concerning this essay is Eliot's memorable remark that Romanticism is "incorporate in Imperialism" and that "the only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it" (1920, 32, 31). He is not being positive about either Romanticism or Imperialism, and the unity of Wyndham's mind is not substantively important in the piece. Although Sherry accurately quotes Eliot's phrase about "a unity and an order" (Eliot 1957, 142) among diverse things visible in Virgil, Sherry does not explain that Eliot is focusing on the *piety* of Aeneas, with a religious dimension reflected in the title. Eliot certainly brings up the Roman Empire in relation to Virgil, but more important is the "Christian World." Sherry's jump from 1919 to 1951 is abrupt. It does not take into account Eliot's concern between the wars about European fragmentation. The threat to European unity led Eliot to cease publication of the *Criterion* just before the start of World War II, and that unity, not imperial unity, is his primary concern in the 1951 essay.

Sherry mentions Wilde briefly, but he does not explore the effect of such a prominent writer associated with decadence on the rise of modernism. The lack of substantive discussion of Wilde and the mischaracterizations of his work are particularly evident in the Eliot chapter. In the suggestive discussion of "mechanical humanity" (242) in some of Eliot's early verse not published in his lifetime, Sherry helpfully draws attention to a poem by Arthur Symons of 1895 because it includes puppets. Missing from the account, however, is any mention of Wilde's "The Harlot's House," a poem of 1885 that presents in an English version of *terza rima* a descent into an urban underworld that involves prominent mention of a puppet, a marionette, and automatons. Especially considering Wilde's imitation of Dante's poetic form, Eliot would have known the poem well. Sherry then goes on to discuss another early Eliot poem, usually referred to as "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," noting



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an allusion to Swinburne but ignoring the numerous aspects of the poem's language that derive from Wilde's *Salomé* (1891, French; 1894, English). Later in the chapter, when he discusses *The Waste Land* and its drafts, Sherry twice (269, 272) identifies Eliot's reference to the color green as a reference to Wilde because of Wilde's famous green carnation, but there is nothing in Eliot's passages beyond the color to support the link. No convincing interpretive point emerges concerning Eliot and Wilde. When Sherry mentions Wilde's dialogue on art, "The Decay of Lying," he calls it a "tract" (260) and characterizes it as formulating "the anti- or pseudo-morality of the poetics of decadence." Calling Wilde's position anti-moralistic can be justified, but calling it pseudo-moralistic requires discussion. A few pages earlier, he says that Wilde "championed" "dishonesty" (253) in "The Decay," when in fact the kind of lying that Wilde's character Vivian recommends challenges delusion and hypocrisy in Victorian culture.

Vincent Sherry's book throws a great deal of light on the connections between decadence and literary modernism. The light it sheds and the shadows cast by that light will enable readers to recognize what remains to be done.



John Paul Riquelme is professor of English at Boston University and co-chair of the Modernism Seminar at the Mahindra Humanities Center (Harvard). He is author or editor of monographs, case studies editions, journal issues, and essays pertaining to literary modernism and to the Gothic tradition from Mary Shelley through Samuel Beckett, most recently an edition of *Dracula* (2016, second edition).

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*On Twentieth-Century Literature's*

Andrew J. Kappel Prize in Literary Criticism, 2017

The winner of this year's prize is Heather Arvidson's "Numb Modernism: Sentiment and the Intellectual Left in Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*." The judge is Cristanne Miller, SUNY Distinguished Professor and Edward H. Butler Professor of Literature at Buffalo SUNY. She has published extensively on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poetry, including *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (1994) and *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Else Lasker-Schüler; Gender and Literary Community in New York and Berlin* (2005). She coedited *Selected Letters of Marianne Moore* and, most recently, has edited a new volume of Emily Dickinson's complete poems, *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them* (2016). Miller founded and currently directs the Marianne Moore Digital Archive ([www.moorearchive.org](http://www.moorearchive.org)), which is publishing in facing-page manuscript and annotated, transcribed format all 122 of Moore's working notebooks.

Professor Miller writes:

The excellent nominated essays for this year's prize covered an interesting and telling critical range—from focus on new ways of reading canonical twentieth-century novelists to analysis of the influence of one press's editorial principles and publications on the cultural/intellectual turn from modernism to postmodernism. All provided trenchant political and historical contextualization for their topics and most considered aspects of affect and impersonality. Each significantly illuminated an author's work, a writing practice, or a cultural moment, and all were a pleasure to read. Andrew J. Kappel himself would have been delighted at the quality of these selections.

"Numb Modernism: Sentiment and the Intellectual Left in Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*" deftly weaves a scrutiny of 1930s leftist periodical and literary writing together with feminist and materialist critique of modernist anti-sentimentalism into a thorough reconsideration of Tess Slesinger's once extremely popular novel *The Unpossessed*. At the same time, the essay provides a marvelous critique of the orthodoxies of objectivity and impersonalism in both leftist and modernist discourse. As the essay argues, modernism and radicalism—although in many ways contrasting movements and critical modes—generally reject sentiment and embodied, individual, personhood in favor of impersonal, intellectual



autonomy, gendering the former (pejoratively) as feminine and the latter as masculine. The result of this dogmatic anti-sentimentalism, in Slesinger's novel, is the failure of affective collectivism and effective political action. Often misread as principally a roman à clef, *The Unpossessed* is revealed in this reading to be a biting and witty satire of the way articulate principled convictions can lead to the derailing of other significant human and social needs, and even prevent broader meaningful communication.

One of the most exciting aspects of this essay is its astute representation of the language and structure of Slesinger's novel as playing equal roles with characterization and narrative in making her implied argument. *The Unpossessed*, the essay argues, mocks the division of the personal from the political through parody and repetition of discursive markers of ideology prevalent in leftist periodicals, which designate objectivity, science, and an impersonal collectivism as the guarantors of value. The novel's characters are "unpossessed" (a play on Dostoevsky's novel, *Demons*—translated into English in the early twentieth century as *The Possessed*) because of their trust in the evasions of selfhood, of personal relationship, and of private property in the name of freedom. Slesinger's satire implicitly proposes, in contrast, that individual freedom and political commitment are predicated on a personhood of individual agency, and that only such affective individuality can in turn lead to an affective community—political or social.

"Numb Modernism"'s conjoining of affect theory, Marxist theory, feminist readings of modernism and the radical left, and intertextual location of the novel in the 1930s produces an exemplary reading of Slesinger's satirical novel and a persuasive analysis of previously under-acknowledged intersections between modernism and the 1930s left.

## §

The Andrew J. Kappel Prize in Literary Criticism, named for the late critic and esteemed deputy editor of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, is awarded annually to the author of a work submitted to the journal during the preceding year that is judged to make the most impressive contribution to our understanding and appreciation of the literature of the twentieth century. Nominees are chosen by the editor of *Twentieth-Century Literature* and members of the editorial board. A different prominent literary critic serves each year as judge. The prize includes an award of \$500 and publication in *Twentieth-Century Literature*.



# Numb Modernism: Sentiment and the Intellectual Left in Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*

Heather Arvidson

To date, twenty-three bright young men have written to Tess Slesinger telling her that her Bruno Leonard, in her book *The Unpossessed*, is exactly like them and where in blazes did she get such intimate information?

—Simon and Schuster, May 28, 1934

If you haven't yet been pinked with the accusation that you're one of "The Unpossessed," it's probably because you haven't been in any arguments recently. (You can expect it any minute, though. Over 600 copies of Tess Slesinger's book were sold yesterday, several possibly to your friends.) —June 1, 1934

Simon and Schuster's series of plucky *New York Times* advertisements suggests at least two reasons to take note of Tess Slesinger's satire of ineffectual New York radicals and a left-wing magazine that fails to materialize. First, the ads rightly bill *The Unpossessed* (1934) as paradigmatically of its time. Subtitled "A Novel of the Thirties" and dedicated "to my contemporaries," *The Unpossessed* claims to crystallize the gestalt of its immediate moment, a view endorsed by reviewers who claimed that Slesinger—"a psychic adept at picking things out of the air" (Chamberlain 1934)—captured Depression-era "bewilderment and waste almost perfectly" (Cantwell 1934, 53) in "quite simply and dogmatically the best novel of contemporary New York City" (Chamberlain 1934).<sup>1</sup> The novel's short-lived burst of popularity registered on best-seller lists of 1934, prompting both a fourth printing within the first month of publication and Slesinger's rise to minor celebrity.<sup>2</sup>



Second, Simon and Schuster capitalizes on the novelty of a new American type burlesqued in literature: the radical intellectual, as manifest in the characters of Bruno Leonard and would-be contributors to his magazine. According to Lionel Trilling, Slesinger was the first to represent in realist fiction radicalized American intellectuals and, in particular, the influential New York group clustered around the *Menorah Journal* (1915–1962).<sup>3</sup> From 1928 to 1932 Slesinger was married to the *Menorah's* assistant editor, Herbert Solow, and through him became acquainted with the journal's core members—Anita Brenner, Elliot Cohen, Clifton Fadiman, Albert Halper, Felix Morrow, Henry Rosenthal, Lionel Trilling, and, more peripherally, Max Eastman and Sidney Hook—caricatured aspects of whom surface in *The Unpossessed*.<sup>4</sup> Yet even as the novel's continued value to American literature relates to its trenchant satire of 1930s intellectuals, both Simon and Schuster and later critics lead us astray when they locate the novel's crux at the level of character. The target on which Slesinger ultimately sets her sights has significantly broader and more enduring implications. Neatly condensed into the trope of the magazine that Slesinger's characters hope to produce, the novel's main critique is aimed at cultural discourse and its means of circulation. In particular, Slesinger shows two of the era's most prominent, and purportedly antagonistic, discursive nodes—modernism and radicalism—to partake of a common system of value: namely, the rejection of sentiment, pejoratively gendered as feminine, and the deprecation of embodied personhood in favor of objectivity and intellectual autonomy. *The Unpossessed* suggests that such impersonalizing constructions of value precede and permeate the terms of explicit political and cultural debate.

Extended to tragicomic extremes, impersonality in Slesinger's hands becomes “the twentieth century social disease” (Slesinger 2002, 283)<sup>5</sup> that produces the novel's population of ghosts, corpses, puppets, and dolls. These figures we might term *impersons*: hapless, at times tenderly pathetic, individuals whose gutted personal lives and numbed sensibilities evince the consequences of dogmatic anti-sentimentalism. In assuming an impersonal narrative voice, *The Unpossessed* dramatizes these consequences through form, reenacting the depersonalizing disease in high modernist style. Yet in pursuit of an etiology of numbness, Slesinger also sketches the minimum affective requirements for political action, and in this she broaches conversation with writers on the Left who championed sentiment, or at least some order of feeling, under the banner of personal commitment—writers, for instance, like Meridel Le Sueur, Michael Gold, and Malcolm Cowley.<sup>6</sup> Among the novel's host of failures and



disappointments, one scene stands out for the regenerative potential it ascribes to feeling, where one character's decision to get pregnant and the ensemble's decision to start a magazine both rely on affective permeability and exchange. In this fleeting moment of interconnection, Slesinger proposes an affective political alternative to negation and numbness, suggesting a way to reject impersonality without simply recuperating sentiment. In doing so, *The Unpossessed* not only captures an atmosphere of feeling in early 1930s New York but also makes a crucial contribution in linking modernism and radicalism, two of the era's defining conversations.

This focus on cultural critique contests established characterizations of *The Unpossessed* as a semi-autobiographical paean to the futility of middle-class radicalism, but it does not negate the significance of Slesinger's biography. Through her proximity to the *Menorah*, Slesinger witnessed, and to some extent participated in, the radicalization of a group of talented young writers who, like her characters, turned to leftist magazines as vehicles for dissent. Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, the *Menorah* moved steadily left in its politics as the journal and its writers became intensely involved in Marxism's factional skirmishes; Cohen and Solow in particular were instrumental in organizing anti-Stalinist opposition to the Communist Party.<sup>7</sup> Sidney Hook would later claim that Slesinger "never understood a word about the political discussions that raged around her" (quoted in Wald 1987, 40), but for several years she undeniably lived close to the storm's center. When Slesinger and Solow divorced, she also broke ties with the *Menorah* and New York's intellectual Left, and *The Unpossessed* issued an ironic and definitive farewell. Hence Trilling claims in his afterword to the 1966 edition that "those who knew Tess Slesinger when she wrote *The Unpossessed* were aware that the book was not only a literary enterprise but also a personal act. It passed judgment upon certain people" ([1966] 1979, 5).

However, in criticism of *The Unpossessed* from 1955 to the present, attention to this personal act has all but overwhelmed the literary enterprise. Substantive engagements with the novel are few, and, with the exceptions of Paula Rabinowitz's fine account of gendered discourse in *Labor and Desire* (1991) and Janet Sharistanian's perceptive afterword to the novel's 1984 edition, criticism of *The Unpossessed* has to varying degrees concentrated on Slesinger's connection to the *Menorah*.<sup>8</sup> The novel has thus often been read as a failure, notable for its introduction of an American intellectual type and incipient gender analysis but inadequate to its task of characterizing Slesinger's eminent contemporaries. Critic Alan Wald, for instance, deems "a failure" the fact that the *Menorah* intellectuals' political



thinking in all its rigorous complexity is missing, rendering the book “limited,” if nonetheless “impressive” (1987, 64). Indeed the perseverance of *The Unpossessed* in cultural memory derives from its dubious status as “our only surviving document on a group of intellectuals,” to use Murray Kempton’s memorable phrase (1955, 122–23). Even Trilling, who refutes Kempton’s view and cautions against “insufficiently critical” uses of the novel as “document,” contends that *The Unpossessed* “would have been a better book still if the author, by a firmer commitment to actuality, had . . . encompassed the political particularities of her time” (1979, 20).

Interpretations framed by biography and focused on character have thus tended to conclude, as Trilling did, that “politics was not [Slesinger’s] subject” and so to see *The Unpossessed*’s implications—and, by extension, its feminist interventions more generally—as limited to the personal realm, as defined against the political. This conclusion is all the more striking when applied to a work that mocks the division between the personal and political in the first place, and to an impersonal narrative that works assiduously to excise traces of an authorizing agent from which the author’s views could be straightforwardly traced. Judged in terms of a roman à clef, the novel’s political analysis registers as too thin and too “feminine,” its dual critiques of gender and radicalism seem to clash, and one character’s nihilistic culminating speech is taken to stand for both “Slesinger’s basic view” (Wald 1987, 69) and the novel’s supposed political upshot that intellectual radicalism is unequivocally futile. However, the internecine leftist debates of the 1930s that manifest in the novel as slogans and posturing are neither peripheral nor merely gestural. The atmosphere of sloganeering and posturing is itself the subject of the novel, as becomes evident when it is placed in the context of late 1920s and early 1930s leftist periodical culture. To this context we now turn.

## Radical discourse in an age for objectivity

“This is the age for objectivity,” declares one of Slesinger’s zealous undergraduates known collectively as the Black Sheep; “the subjective went out with individualism” (*U* 104). Such phrases epitomize the fashionable rhetoric of radical impersonality that Slesinger parodies and condense several key concepts of 1930s leftist discourse: objectivity, collectivism, and a sense of contemporaneity synchronized with the revolutionary cause. Slesinger’s manipulation of this discourse becomes visible when *The Unpossessed* is read in response to leftist journals such as the *Modern Quarterly* (1923–52),<sup>9</sup> *New Masses* (1926–48), the *Communist*



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(1922–44), the *New Republic* (1914–), the *Nation* (1865–), and the *Partisan Review* (1934–36; 1937–2003). Demonstrating a modernist fascination with quotation, Slesinger lifts notable, recurrent phrases that circulated in these journals and reassembles them as a pastiche of clichés. In this framework *The Unpossessed* appears as a collage of Marxist idioms and a sharp-witted rebuttal to the doctrines they cite. Indeed Bruno's gala speech, torn to pieces and scattered "like confetti" (U 278), could be taken to represent pastiche itself, as so many scraps of discourse drifting through the air.

The lexical overlap between radical periodicals and *The Unpossessed* makes plain Slesinger's citational method. From leftist discourse she borrows language belonging to several main tropes: disease, death, and decomposition; dead ends (and cognates: blind alleys, *cul de sacs*, futility of any variety); reproduction (embryos, rebirth, ripeness, but especially forms of reproductive failure—impotence, sterility, stillbirth, abortion); and what can be termed public feeling—in this case, a sense of urgency and epochal confusion combined with a hardboiled, anti-sentimental sensibility. Bruno's repeated references to figurative disease, for instance, are indebted to leftist phrase-making about "our American disease" (Wilson 1931b, 279). Radical writer and journalist Meridel Le Sueur describes "a middle-class malady . . . a sickness common to all of us nourished on rotten bourgeois soil" in which "people [are] rotting, dying in this dead class like plants decaying in foul soil" (1935, 22, 23). To roughly the same point, Kenneth Burke avers that "beneath a seasonal economic ill lies a basic cultural ill" (1931, 329) and Edmund Wilson's bracing conclusion to a 1932 *New Republic* article posits a blind alley in which liberal culture goes to die: "That other [i.e., capitalist] world is dying at the end of its blind alley; but this other [the Marxist], just coming to maturity, has its immense creative work to do" (1932, 228). Bruno imitates this weave of dead ends and embryonic beginnings in his Hunger March speech, first announcing, "I am with message" and then, as the message falls apart, instructing his students to "leave us rotting in [the] blind alley" (U 280, 285). Characters' speeches are punctuated by the kairotic imperatives that echo throughout leftist cultural criticism: Slesinger inserts stock phrases—"The time is ripe" (86) and "It's time we took our stand" (224, 271)—that chime with "The time has come" and "One must decide now between two worlds" in the leftist press.<sup>10</sup> Slesinger also repurposes the phrase "boring from within," which references a radical strategy that in earlier decades had been subject to bitter contention. The phrase resurfaces as the title of Burke's 1931 *New Republic* article, which half-facetiously advises leftists to ditch Marx and



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join Tammany Hall or the YMCA in order to insinuate revolution from inside capitalist "conformity itself" (328) and so dodge both party dogma and bourgeois backlash.<sup>11</sup> Substituting for Burke's irony an absurdly solipsistic fantasy of espionage, one of Slesinger's intellectuals claims "boring from within" (U 158) as a revolutionary tactic that licenses him to advance the cause by partaking in bourgeois decadence, particularly in the form of sex with filthy rich capitalists.

Intensely attuned to the language of radical culture, Slesinger not only parodies this language but also pinpoints certain discursive markers of value and dismissal that surface insistently in leftist periodicals. In particular, she seizes on scientific objectivity and collectivism as two tropes by which impersonality is endorsed and individual emotions devalued. In representative *New Republic* and *Modern Quarterly* articles of 1932, Marxism is touted as an adamantly scientific enterprise: "Marxism . . . is a scientific point of view" and "not a crying after the moon, but a scientific approach to the problem of revolution" (Wilson 1932, 227; Calverton 1932). These are conventional formulations, and the leftist press brims with similar statements banking on objectivity and science as guarantors of value. Indeed, in factional debates, the implicit value of scientific objectivity often fares better than do central tenets of Marxism. "In the effort to make revolutionary thinking scientific," Max Eastman, for instance, conducted a long and erratic campaign to junk dialectical materialism as "animistic" religiosity (1933a, 290).<sup>12</sup> Sydney Hook, who in Wald's words evolved "a complex argument that Marxism is 'scientific' while not a 'science' per se" (Wald 1987, 121–22), eviscerated Eastman in a famously vituperative exchange in the *Modern Quarterly*. Hook claimed that Eastman knew "next to nothing about scientific method" (1931, 89) and only gave it "lip service" via "a rather emasculated brand of instrumentalism" (1928, 389). Eastman's retort presumes to trump the trump: "Hook refuses to have Marxism restated in this scientific . . . manner" (1933a, 293). Hook's position was further impugned by Earl Browder, chairman of the Communist Party USA, who vaunted "the futility of logical agility in conflict with the objective truth of the monolithic Marxian system" (1933a, 146) and "the objective scientific character of our program and our philosophy" (1933b, 299).

These arguments enact an impasse between scientific objectivity and scientistic Marxist doctrine. Each writer claims to have a more authentic grasp of scientific method and hence to be the stauncher theorist of modern (i.e., scientific) revolution. As a result, scientistic claims are virtually unassailed and settle into a formulaic set of dismissals. Polemics



are peppered with accusations of “sentimental theology,” “emotional faith,” “emotional belief,” and “religious emotion.”<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv damn critics for whom “Marxism is not a science but a *sentiment*,” who substitute “gush on the one hand, and invective on the other, for analysis” (1934, 5). Not only is science constructed in opposition to emotionality and faith, but the gendered perils of failing to be “hard-boiled about radicalism”—that is, oriented by principle and data, not “individual emotion” and dogma (Soule 1931, 262)—surface in the vocabulary of emasculation, gush, and sentiment. In other words, Marxists can sound a lot like modernists.<sup>14</sup>

In its repudiation of sentiment, scientism was joined by collectivism, which disavowed not only emotion but also anything construed as personal, private, or individual. In 1927 V. F. Calverton declared individualism already an “anachronism” under attack by “the whole structure of contemporary society” (1927, 12). This statement lends credence to Richard Pells’s claim that individualism functioned as “the chief symbolic villain for most intellectuals” of the 1930s (1973, 112), and, as such, it figured as collectivism’s sentimental foil in the leftist magazines. Literary or activist solidarity with the proletarian collective was sanctioned as the single alternative to both capitalism and the spirit of narcissism and escapism that pervaded the 1920s. In Newton Arvin’s words, “a truly proletarian literature would mean a break with the mood of self-pity, with the cult of romantic separatism, with [the] sickly subjectivism and melodramatic misanthropy” (1931, 393) that characterized the 1920s’ emotionally indulgent individualism. Any facet of human life deemed “an individual and not a social affair . . . [was] therefore of little significance” (Calverton 1927, 11) according to many radicals; the revolutionary “must, therefore, constantly strive to proceed from the personal to the general” (Hicks 1933, 5). Hinging on “therefore,” such statements take collectivism as a logical premise and authorize in leftist discourse the reflexive pejoration and dismissal of the personal.

This discursive tradition produced an insistent rhetoric of self-denial, as evinced by Upton Sinclair’s contribution to a 1927 *New Masses* symposium on “the correct revolutionary proletarian attitude towards sex” (1927). Sinclair advises radicals to “regulate their lives effectively” in order to commit themselves entirely to the workers’ cause, which not only meant avoiding sexual affairs that waste time in “a tangle of futile and distracting emotions” but “appl[ied] equally as well to any . . . other activities . . . [including] eating and drinking, waking and sleeping, walking and talking.” Sinclair’s commentary speaks volumes about the



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mechanisms of repudiation and prohibition that sustained collectivist discourse, particularly in its campaign against "futile emotions." Coding emotions as waste, this discourse likewise casts suspicion on any personal activity that cannot be called to collective account.

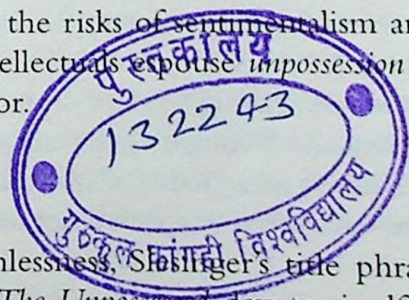
As a result, the self-sacrificing intellectual was in turn vulnerable to the charge of using the workers' cause to escape personal problems. In a moment of disturbing recognition, Slesinger's character Miles Flinders sees his radical friends "suddenly, coming together less from their belief in revolution . . . than from some terrible inner need in each of them to lay out his own personal conflicts in terms of something higher, to solve his private ends camouflaged as world-problems, secretively in public" (U 188). The impersonality of higher causes and world-problems, in other words, is potentially always an intellectual subterfuge for hiding personal problems in plain sight. Here Miles voices the skepticism expressed by liberal commentator Joseph Wood Krutch a few months before *The Unpossessed* was published. "Is it not possible," Krutch muses, "that some revolutionists have become what they are because they found difficulty with themselves as individuals, and discovered in the professional denunciation of the capitalist system a very successful means of running away from the selves which they dared not face?" (1933, 746). Krutch received an answer in the *New Masses* from Rebecca Pitts, who justifies radical impersonality and parries Krutch's charge of escapism in kind: she diagnoses Krutch a "confused individualist" (1934, 17) who has fallen for the capitalist ruse of locating modern integrity in "personality" (14). The "'modern' attitude" is defined by "a lack of positive faith—in anything" (14, 15), Pitts writes, which causes individuals to recede from the social world and locate all significance in their private selves. Pitts argues that the solution to the chaotic impersonality of modern life is not to invest in personality but to submit one's self to the ordered and virtuous impersonality of the workers' cause. Accordingly, she names Marxism "the only legitimate heir" (16) to faiths expired under the pressures of modern science and skepticism. Abjuring mere "intellectual assent," she advocates "deep surrender" and "renunciation" of "the separate 'I'" to "the collective 'we.'" Notably, she describes modern personality as centered on an impulse toward "acquisition," seeing psychic adjustment as driven by capitalist accumulation. In contrast, communism works by divestment. It entails "giving one's life away" (15), renouncing "the personalistic ego" (16), and merging one's purpose with the collective revolutionary movement. Pitts translates communism into a spiritual doctrine, rhyming collective ownership of the "functionally subordinate" self with the economic abolishment of private property.



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Hence Pitts's account of collectivism vividly renders the affective appeal that many 1930s Marxists typically suppressed. Casting radical collectivism as a conversion narrative, Pitts's communism epitomizes the "sentimental theology" that Hook, Eastman, and Browder so noisily reject. But while scientistic Marxism insists that faith is an emotion, and emotions are waste-products of ideology, and sentimental collectivism preaches that political commitment transpires by faith alone, both potentially depend on self-abnegation. As *The Unpossessed* asks us to see, their shared value in impersonality is as significant as their differences. These two discursive strains roughly correspond to what James T. Farrell defined in 1936 as two "streams in revolutionary [literary] criticism"—"mechanically deterministic 'Marxism'" and "revolutionary sentimentalism"—and, as Farrell explains, despite "starting from opposite poles" they "usually meet in the same rut" (1936, 29).

Slesinger rehearses the conflicts that constitute radical discourse not to arbitrate between these strains but, rather, to cast impersonality as the rut in which they both bottom out. They collaborate in rendering *personal life* and *emotion* pejorative terms and expelling the pragmatic bases for individuality. Pells argues that the 1930s was characterized by "an almost religious need to believe in something regardless of its truth" (1973, 190), but Slesinger shows that belief was at the same time undercut by suspicion of sentimentalism: at least among her set, fervor had somehow to be quixotically sublimated into rational conviction. On the flip side, Slesinger portrays scientistic radicalism as closeted religiosity that aspires to but never fully achieves the consolations of faith. Indeed, in Slesinger's analysis scientism and collectivism articulate two poses that radicals awkwardly attempt to strike but cannot hold. Her intellectuals fail to rhetorically navigate the contradictions between them, and their discursive dead ends produce lived ones. Wobbling between the risks of sentimentalism and intellectualized escapism, Slesinger's intellectuals espouse *impossession* as radicalism's lowest common denominator.



## On unpossession

Combining propertylessness with faithlessness, Slesinger's title phrase designates a species of alienation that *The Unpossessed* devotes itself to examining. The novel takes place in the fall of 1932 and, in the words of one reviewer, includes "no development, unless you count the progress from one fiasco to another" (Cantwell 1934, 53). Said fiascos are structured by three intertwining plots: Bruno Leonard and his friends Jeffrey



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Blake and Miles Flinders propose a radical literary magazine; Bruno's cousin and love interest, Elizabeth Leonard, makes her prodigal return from the artistic enclaves of Europe; and Miles and his wife Margaret Flinders negotiate marital peril. These plotlines are marked by inaction and negation: work on the magazine's manifesto produces ideological strife but no manuscript; Jeffrey's ostensibly tactical maneuvers with the bourgeoisie and the anti-Stalinist Left are exposed as merely failed amorous adventures; Elizabeth returns to the United States for Bruno only to see their mutual ardor dissipate in witticism and whiskey; and Miles, recalling the lost puritanism of his childhood, eddies in the realization that Marx is his second god to fail. Things culminate only in two calamities. The magazine's lavish Hunger March gala implodes when Bruno finds his inaugural speech torn to shreds and delivers instead a cynical oration on the fraudulence of middle-class radicalism; and the Flinders' near brush with a personal life concludes with Miles's retreat into his emotional shell and their semi-mutual choice to terminate Margaret's pregnancy.

The characters' chronic state of unpossession is the ambivalent product of, on the one hand, a studied, modern evasion of restrictive ties in the name of freedom (in Bruno's words to proto-flapper Elizabeth, "Don't get possessed, kid" [*U* 115]) and, on the other, the surrender of selfhood and private ownership as prescribed by radical discourse of the 1930s. Both of these strategies fail in the novel, and for roughly the same reason: individual freedom and political commitment are equally predicated on a personhood that the logic of unpossession fundamentally undermines. As Pitts has made clear, unpossession would seem to fit intuitively with the anti-acquisitive logic of communism. Indeed, it inverts—and negates—the syntax of liberal philosophy's founding premise of possessive individualism: as "the unpossessed," the possessive individual is herself converted into property but only to reject the relation of possession altogether. In Marxist or modernist terms this might be a corrective, liberating individuals from the expropriating gears of capitalist production and bourgeois social obligation, and Slesinger's satire hinges on these potentially positive outcomes. Yet her intellectuals fail in every way to make good on that potential: they adopt neither Pitts's transcendent collectivism nor Marxism's ideal of the liberated proletarian's self-reclamation—nor do they successfully revert to liberalism's promise of unfettered individual freedom or even the flapper's fantasy of sublime detachment. As it turns out, all of these outcomes require a form of agency that unpossession precludes.

Slesinger's debt to Dostoevsky helps to illuminate the understanding of personal conviction that underlies these failures. *The Unpossessed* alludes



to Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, as the novel now translated as *Demons* (1871–72) was known during Slesinger's lifetime,<sup>15</sup> and it borrows from Dostoevsky the suggestion that revolutionary belief is a form of spiritual possession residing inside the body and animating the believer. Yet, imagined as possession, such belief is also exogenous; originating outside and infiltrating the individual, it is a foreigner that integrates itself with the believer. Indeed, under the aegis of possession, one not only incorporates but is reciprocally incorporated into belief; hence, the relation extends the possessed individual beyond her embodied boundaries. A Dostoevsky character aptly remarks on this ambivalence between insides and outsides when he insists, "It was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you" (quoted in Pevear 1994, xviii). Crucially, whereas Doestoevskian possession is a state of demonic inhabitation by revolutionary ideas, its reversal in Slesinger's neologism poses a new problem rather than a solution to Dostoevsky's. For Slesinger, unpossession designates both the vacuity where conviction should reside and an individual resolutely sealed against any such animating infiltration.

In *The Unpossessed* this hermeticism relates specifically to feeling—and in particular to the feelings of others. Affect theorists suggest why: emotion is catching.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Dostoevsky's revolutionary mastermind seizes on the fact that "socialism spreads principally through sentimentality" (1994, 385), Slesinger's radicals permit no such incursions. With the significantly porous exception of Margaret Flinders, Slesinger satirizes her intellectuals for their quasi-paranoiac vigilance of affective boundaries. The guarded self-enclosure of Miles Flinders is exemplary: a "hard-shell baptist [*sic*] beetle," he is "impenetrable" and "cloistered" (U 51). His carapace is a product of hard formulas he derives straight from scientistic Marxism; for example, that "economic determinism [*is*] responsible for even private motives"—"even most marriages" (52). "Stifled" and "swallowed" (17) by the soft feelings he ascribes categorically to women, Miles repulses feminine affection with violently rationalized rebuttals: Margaret, for instance, "wouldn't see a social trend . . . unless it was crammed down [*her*] personal throat" (18). To remain free "to breathe in his own private rhythm" (22), Miles resists affective circuits that would necessarily link him to others.

Miles's near equal in impenetrability, the flapper Elizabeth, is not "hard-shell[ed]" but, rather, "hard-boiled," and grows "gayer and harder" (96) each year, her wit a "barbed wire fence" (98) through which "no one can come and touch" her (119). Like Miles, she makes her entrance to the narrative in the act of rebuffing an affective assault. Parting from



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a bohemian lover in Paris who sagely “mete[s] out just how much sentiment she could take,” Elizabeth in her opening scene can “not resist not sobbing” (95, 92). “She could not help not not saying again not once but not numberless times” (91) that she may have found love and may not really want to leave. The proliferating negation in these sentences, and throughout the scene, mimics a habit of refusal so thoroughly assimilated that it shuts down incipient feeling with nearly the automation of a reflex. The cognitive overload of parsing negation in triplicate (“not not once but not numberless”) effects an anesthesia that blocks feeling at the physiological sensor. As a result, her final goodbye wrenches only metonymic tears from a disputed copy of *Ulysses* that “burst[s] into passionate weeping on the floor” (101). Should grief become sensible, Elizabeth taunts herself back into line: “You donkey, you sentimentalist, you cry-baby, you sissy” (112). In gynophobia, too, Elizabeth keeps pace with Miles.

Nonetheless, in the inner workings of both Elizabeth and Miles, Slesinger underscores an ambivalent mismatch between feelings expected and manifest. Despite a policy of hardness, some part of Miles “want[s] to be taken out of his shell” (19) and some part of Elizabeth “to be loved and desired and possessed” (93). Neither, though, as Elizabeth observes, can “stand it when it happens” and their attempts at emotional management must systematically contest feeling’s legitimacy in contexts that range from mundane to exigent. Indeed, in defining its era according to the emotional paradigm of Miles and Elizabeth, the novel bears out historian Peter Stearns’s observation that a new “aversion to emotional intensity” (1994, 11) emerged in the 1920s and took hold of American culture in the 1930s.

As Slesinger shows, despite their ideological feuds, modernist aesthetes (like Elizabeth) and scientific Marxists (like Miles) collaborate in fashioning and enforcing the era’s anti-sentimental ideals. And discourse performs an important role in the process. As Eve Sedgwick contends, “There isn’t a distinction to be *made* between sentimentality and its denunciation” (2008, 153). In *The Unpossessed*, to label a feeling, utterance, or behavior “sentimental” is to register a disciplinary intervention. Bruno, for instance, catches himself in the act of sentiment five times (*U* 170, 171, 174, 178, 285), and even Margaret stays her expectations of intimacy by calling herself sentimental (58). As June Howard notes, when employed pejoratively, sentiment appraises emotions that come in the wrong kind or quantity—marking emotion’s moment of being “*recognized* as socially constructed” (1999, 65, 66). The difficulty, however, is in determining the limits of appropriate or authentic feeling, and characters’ nervousness



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about sentiment in *The Unpossessed* manifests in the vigilance they direct toward the regulation of all forms of emotional life.

If, as the Black Sheep bleat, "only results matter" and "everything in the world . . . is propaganda" (U 104), then in fact there isn't a distinction to be drawn between spontaneous feeling, of the correct kind and in the correct quantity, and inauthentic, ideologically constructed sentiment. As leftist periodicals insisted, any feeling that could be construed as "sentimental," "private," or "personal" potentially cued bourgeois solipsism. Thus when Jeffrey cavils about "selling out . . . old friends," he frets that he is giving in to "atavistic bourgeois sentiment" (129). "Bourgeois argument" collocates with "sentimental" and "specious" (175) in the Black Sheep's crib notes for revolution, which sanction only concrete objectives like full bellies and absolute industrial efficiency. It is, after all, the "age for objectivity" and, according to Bruno, "the intellectual . . . is a scientist" (174). Hence appeals to interiority or private interests are taken as reactionary and the idea of a "personal life" as unintelligible, if not reprehensible. "What exactly do you mean, a *personal* life?" (252) one Black Sheep echoes disdainfully when Margaret asks what she plans to do about one. Tears are bourgeois by the same rationale, and in jest the Black Sheep call their female colleagues "sentimental bourgeois hussies" (235) for crying at a wedding.

As this last instance attests, the sentimental poses a particular threat to the novel's women, whose legitimacy as communists and modernists is contingent on their success in shucking the stigma of sentimental femininity. The androgyny of the female Black Sheep—"exclusive twentieth century product[s]," as Bruno observes, "half-boy, half-girl, born yesterday, of movies, radio and matter-of-fact class-consciousness" (103)—certifies their hardboiled radicalism. Female aesthetes are likewise modern only insofar as they reject gendered sentiment. "If you go sentimental, you have only yourself to blame," young Bruno warns adolescent Elizabeth in one of her flashbacks to 1920s suburban Chicago: "Throw out the notions that possess you, outmoded superstitions of a bygone day. . . . Shake yourself free, Elizabeth, step out boldly like a man" (119, 115). Elizabeth recalls the occasion but, more important, the discourse of this explicit tutorial on the rules governing feeling for the new generation. "Going sentimental" (148), as Elizabeth learns, means playing the lady's game, falling for romantic love, and accepting passé bourgeois restrictions. This is another domain in which it pays to recall Dostoevsky's possession: "Don't get possessed" means don't eat bourgeois morality, and don't let it eat you. Instead, Bruno advises autonomy and masculine freedom: "Be light, be free, be casual" (115).



Yet the result of Bruno's advice is not freedom so much as disembodiment. Waking on the steamer the day of her arrival in New York, Elizabeth conceives of her body as itself a vacant vehicle: "Emptiness crept from her chest with a vague ache through her body, as though all her limbs were hollow. It was nostalgia" (145–46). As a corporeal instance of negation, nostalgia contributes to the novel's wider pattern of numbness and negated personhood. Emptiness supplants Elizabeth's sense of existing as a presence inside her body, delivering her into the curious condition of not being where she is: "Whatever bed I wake in I shall not belong there! I shall not be there!" (145), the ache informs her. "Not being there," in the place where her empty body is, amounts to her being dispossessed of her own form. Indeed, the split between body and consciousness is a pervasive problem for Slesinger's anti-sentimentalists (both modern and radical) and paradigmatic of what it means to be unpossessed. Through the figurative prevalence of impersons—mannequins, dolls, puppets, marionettes, statues, ghosts, and corpses—Slesinger suggests that unpossession is a state of affective deficit that fails to meet the minimum requirement for personhood. Impersons are anthropomorphic shells hollowed of human content.

Examples are worth enumerating, as they make evident among Slesinger's motley cast a commonality that derives from programmatic repudiations of feeling. Merle Middleton, the magazine's bored benefactress, is variously described as made of "papier-mâché" (227), as "a glacier that tried to melt, a toy doll that wanted a heart that would beat instead of just eyes that closed" (166), a bloodless "woman caked in ice" (254), and "a plaster cast of Venus." Merle's son Emmett, containing "hollow after hollow of loneliness" (134), is "a little ghost of something human" (274). Bruno casts the revolution as a "ghost brigade . . . corpse parade . . . fellow traveler charade" (283). He is also "a man of stone" and Elizabeth his "futile replica" (273). Elizabeth is, further, "a conscious mannequin" (243), "a brittle tin soldier" (245), and "a mechanical doll" (283). Toy innards notwithstanding, she has, by her own account, "plenty of guts" (247)—more than any man, as Bruno concurs—but no "nerve" (248): that is, no electricity to liven the circuits. Miles, the "dried-up intellectual husk" (299), "bob[s] like an empty ghost" (303). If Miles were presented "on the puppet-stage," Bruno jokes, "the audience would boo, demanding a more life-like marionette" (19). Playing Blue Fairy to Miles's Pinocchio, Margaret is to endow him with the feeling he lacks and so transform him into a real boy, but this is a double bind, since to be animated vicariously by Margaret's emotion would make Miles—at least



to his own anti-sentimental mind—into a puppet of another, plusher kind: “Outwardly he would seem then more of a man; he could bow and smirk in public; . . . he would be the puppet of a man and she could pull his strings, dangle him this way and that. Inside he would be nothing” (187).

The metaphoric incoherence of these proliferating tropes is part of the point. They contribute to the novel's satire of leftist discourse, but their convergence on impersonality also gravely underscores the novel's upshot. Despite seeming to invert each other, for instance, ghost and corpse name two angles on the same event: the body's dissociation from the abstract operations of consciousness. More literally, such tropes imply numbness itself. Take for example the magazine meeting during which Cornelia, one of the Black Sheep, faints from hunger as the unpossessed can only look on aghast. Seeing a roomful of radicals animatedly debating manifesto rhetoric but unable to respond adequately to the most concrete fact of poverty, Bruno thinks:

The uncomplicated physical had no reality for them; its unexpected presence had one chief effect—while their busy abstract minds worked to reconcile it with some preaccepted doctrine, some maxim of their own, their emotions were stricken in a harsh new way which argument would fail to solace; their bodies (his own was numb) were paralyzed by this sudden failure of their minds, this wretched cancelling of emotions they were unaccustomed to. . . . Bruno knew that before the last ten minutes he had been skeptical even of hunger. . . . But all the time through the numbness of his body, his own belly ached with a fierce imitation of Cornelia's. (183–84)

Bruno's idea is tangled, but “the uncomplicated physical” evidently sparks a short circuit in the radical organism. Emotions are evoked but, “stricken in a harsh new way,” are canceled along with bodily sensation and mental functioning. Reduced to “corpses” and “ghosts” (183, 184), the intellectuals are thus rendered paralyzed or numb, and at least partly to blame is how emotionally unprepared they are to encounter the real, embodied effects of economic inequality. Bruno's bellyache, a “fierce imitation of Cornelia's,” may be cause for some hope, yet “imitation” is a conspicuous substitute for empathy, suggesting that Bruno is not possessed by any genuinely transitive feeling. Like Elizabeth before him, he might be possessed by the ache of emptiness; or perhaps Cornelia has simply reminded him that he is hungry.



In this episode emotional and political failures are thus directly aligned. When numbness recurs at two other pivotal moments in *The Unpossessed*—at Elizabeth's homecoming and in the aftermath of Margaret's abortion—characters likewise fail to experience emotional permeability or exchange that such occasions might call for and, indeed, on which collective action seems to depend. Failing to embody even their own bodies, Slesinger's numb radicals cannot be moved to revolutionary action, lacking basic solidarity with workers whose economic existence is so fundamentally determined by the body. If Cornelia's faint provokes in Miles and Bruno a sense of emergency, it is nonetheless a benumbed one and prompts no transformation. They remain "static . . . ironic ghosts," Bruno concludes, "dead beyond recall" (192). As such they continue in abject, hermetic isolation. Bruno reenters his "impenetrable personal fog" (197), drinking himself insensible and evading any real exchange with Elizabeth, while Miles, though desperate for revolutionary possession ("Let the struggle be brought to his door, injected in his veins," he prays; "Let the struggle be his own" [189]), perseveres in his campaign against all things soft, personal, and corporeal. In bed, he inches away from his wife, "until his head . . . had left the pillow quite behind, till it hung like a severed fruit upon the edge" (190), the intellectual head triumphantly severed from the desiring body. Such scenes culminate in the cynical outburst of Bruno's final speech: "We come, each of us, believing in nothing . . . equipped with . . . the symptoms . . . of our own personal disease . . . and play at making revolutions for a band of workers we've never even seen" (285). Their political failure, he insists, derives from their insensibility to the world outside the mind. "Are we going to dope ourselves and stuff ourselves, intoxicate ourselves, anaesthetize ourselves against all decent feeling—and meanwhile miss the bus?" he asks. "The answer is: WE ARE" (280).

## Why they can't have a magazine

Bruno's speech is a bleak ending, but Slesinger does offer a glimmer of contingent possibility in the chapter that concludes the first of the novel's four parts, "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" This chapter addresses what is lost to the rigors of anti-sentimentalism, and it does so in large part through form. Evading rhetorical signals of an interpreting consciousness, *The Unpossessed* remains committed to impersonal narration throughout—yet in "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" such narration reverses the effect of atomized alienation it elsewhere delivers: here, narrative impersonality makes legible the unspoken currents flowing



between characters that might draw them together in common purpose. Even as the chapter parodies the proletarian-novel set piece of a rousing collective finale,<sup>17</sup> it endorses a political and interpersonal vision rooted in collective faith. This alternative vision depends on the exchange of affect that moves between permeable bodies very much in the way that impersonal narration moves discursively between permeable minds.

The novel's narrative is impersonal in that it provides characters' perceptions with minimal stylistic trace of a central intelligence calling the shots. While most chapters can be understood to maintain the viewpoint of a single character, even chapters that switch among viewpoints use at least three strategies to avoid positing a storyteller in charge of the narrative discourse. First, shifts in voice are often unmarked, so that contextual clues alone signal changes in pronoun referents. For example, "He thought of the rainy attic afternoons. . . . He eyed Margaret with resentment" (84) shifts from one "he" of attic afternoons (Bruno) to another one (Miles) eyeing Margaret. In this way the narrative elides any suggestion that someone is making narrative choices or accommodating a reader's need for orientation.

Second, as a result of such unmarked shifts, signs that might initially indicate an appraising consciousness are often then quickly located in the perspective of a particular character, so that the prospect of a narrative center never quite materializes. One paragraph begins, for example, with this sentence: "Whatever it was that he had given her, she returned it to Bruno ten times over now" (86). The relative pronoun "whatever," the mild hyperbole of "ten times over," and the temporal deictic "now" might well suggest a speculating narrative mind at work, but the next sentence continues the thought in indirect discourse, making clear its thinker is Bruno: "We need women, he thought."

Third, narrative duties like assessing a scene or interpreting events are often performed in language clearly identified with a particular character. The narrator tells us, for instance, that a passage of direct speech is "said [by] the wind-breaker conciliatingly (jumping his hands on his lap like a baby)" (161). The character metonymically identified by his windbreaker is Jeffrey—the hands give him away—and the focalizer is Al Middleton, recognizable by his normative reflex to discipline what he sees as "unmanly" behavior and by his preoccupation with Jeffrey's jacket (he recollects having seen it before: the windbreaker identifies Jeffrey as the man having an affair with Al's wife). Even as it is occasionally impossible to attribute language conveying stance or judgment to a particular character, for the most part, these three devices allow the novel to proceed



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without cues that might indicate authorial investment, muting the fact that narrative language has to originate somewhere.

This systematic disavowal of a narrative center has led to a near consensus among Slesinger's critics that, culminating with Bruno's gala speech, *The Unpossessed* rejects the revolutionary movement or, at least, intellectuals' participation in it. Philip Rahv wondered whether Bruno, as the author's surrogate, had "absconded" with Slesinger (Rahv 1934, 26); if Bruno has been charged to speak the novel's truth, then intellectual radicalism is not just dead but "rotting in [the] blind alley" of the bourgeoisie (*U* 285). This interpretation, however, stems from what I've argued is a significant misreading. As George Stevens puts it, Slesinger "keeps out of the picture" and "lets her people present themselves" (1934), and thus none of them, not even Bruno, can be said to straightforwardly represent her view. For Stevens, Slesinger lets characters "present themselves, but," as he goes on to say, "she has nothing to say about them," an authorial absence, as he reads it, that renders the novel's purpose and politics opaque. Like Rahv, Stevens here seems to expect that the chief target of Slesinger's satire is her characters, and thus that their words or personalities should (if indirectly) reveal her own perspective. Shifting critical focus from characters to discourse, however, renders visible the pattern of unpossession Slesinger weaves from various anti-sentimental threads, including leftist values, interpersonal barriers, norms of feeling, and empty ghosts. The impersonality of the novel's narration is part of that pattern, foregrounding both the operations of this anti-sentimental discourse and its benumbing consequences. Individuated as they may appear, the unpossessed are nonetheless lumped together from the title onward. Impersonal narration suggests that we need to look to the novel's larger discursive and formal patterns for its argument, and in "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" narrative impersonality registers most plainly not as a straightforward rejection of radical culture but as a corrective to it.

Central to that chapter is the connection *The Unpossessed* emplots between distrust of emotion and two modes of regenerative failure: political and biological.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, emotional profusion, in its brief appearance, affiliates with regeneration and futurity. In juxtaposing the triumvirate's (failed) magazine with Margaret's (aborted) pregnancy, Slesinger reworks the familiar literary homology between male textual production and female sexual reproduction, and *The Unpossessed* most fully examines the relationship between these two instances of negated creativity in the episode of their linked inception as affectively charged ideas. Here, the title question "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" meets



its homologue, "Why don't we have children?" (82), and for an instant it seems that Slesinger's unpossessed may get to have them both. In a novel predicated on negation, this chapter stands out for these two affirmative events: the galvanizing of a micro-community poised to act and the re-union of a somewhat estranged couple in the interest of (what Margaret sees as) "perpetuat[ing] themselves" (304). Before this point the magazine had consisted of a rumor and a filing cabinet; it lacks vitality until Bruno (inspired by a brief impression of Margaret-as-Madonna and an ensuing conversation about the womb's formidable creative power), cries, "Oh what the hell. . . . I propose we *have* the God damn Magazine" (85). Intersplicing Bruno's proposition, Margaret counts off months, and when she reaches the ninth the implication is clear: just as Bruno has resolved to start the magazine, Margaret has decided to get pregnant.

Although the novel contrasts male production with female reproduction throughout, only in this chapter is the latter privileged. Margaret's unspoken question "Why don't we have children?" sparks a series of constructive developments: Bruno champions the magazine, Miles falls back in love with Margaret, Margaret invests in pregnancy as a *fait accompli*, and the whole group rallies for a common cause. Subordinating male production to female reproduction, Bruno thinks "We need women . . . ; we can't get far without them" (86). Like Bruno, Miles sees creative functions as sexually distinct, though he construes the relation as agon—"womb versus world" (186). Here and elsewhere, characters' assumptions of such gender distinctions can seem to exemplify the essentialist discourse to which the novel's critics have objected. The way production is yoked to reproduction would indeed seem to assume the sexed division between intellectual and biological creativity and, further, to give tribute to what Trilling called "the waning cult of Woman" ([1966] 1979, 22). At the same time, reading the essentialism straight tends to flatten the burlesque against which it appears,<sup>19</sup> and, as Trilling puts it, "at least a little irony must surely have touched" Slesinger's depictions of gender. Partly this is a matter of the novel's narrative impersonality rendering the question of its understanding of essentialism undecidable—essentialism is potentially satirized, not advanced—but it's also that the emotional dynamics at the novel's core unseat the antithetical foundation on which "womb versus world" essentialism is formulated. Indeed, the characters' explicit essentialism is challenged by the novel's affective theory of social genesis, which is gendered only insofar as emotion is. If in Slesinger's 1930s women are associated with emotion, then the theory of women's fundamental creativity slips toward a theory of the creative potential of



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emotion. "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" enacts that theory. It is the suspension of the usual rules governing feeling, not the farcical influence of "the womb," that accounts for the chapter's uniquely positive outcomes in both effect and affect.

At the chapter's opening, in the crisis of an awkward party silence, the characters' mastery over feelings and boundaries is interrupted. Even as they recede into private thoughts, they exude feelings that pool in the silence and impinge viscerally on each person: Margaret feels that the silence "welled from all of them. It beat upon her ear-drums. Echoed in her blood" (77); Miles experiences "concentrated, coiled-up tension" as "the silence stood over him" (78); Bruno detects "a fearful throbbing in the air, of all their muted instruments" (77) and "fumes of silence [that] rose up from the rug" (79).

The group is drawn into an aggregate of feeling, but the individual emotions that collect—fear, terror, pain, despair, and confusion but also compassion, joy, hope, and satisfaction—have peculiarly little to do with that transpersonality. Indeed, two modes of feeling develop simultaneously. Even as each person is experiencing particularized emotions within a personal narrative frame, the silence registers an excess that is common to the group; perceived in the body but external to it, the silence moves among bodies as amplification of emotional states, not as content. This distinction between personal and nonpersonal feelings anticipates recent theories of affect, and Brian Massumi's (2002) in particular. In Massumi's terms, the scene makes visible the difference between, on the one hand, privately and cognitively experienced emotions, sociolinguistically qualified and "index[ed] to conventional meanings," and, on the other, "the strength" (2002, 28, 24) of the silence's effect on the body as unqualified intensity. Figured as fumes, haptic pulses, and waves both fluid and sonic, Slesinger's affect manifests as "vibratory motion" "at the surface of the body, at its interface with things" (Massumi 2002, 25, 26)—some of which happen to be the palpable feeling states of other people in the room. It is significant that both Margaret and Bruno convey the silence's intensity as "din" (U 79, 82): it makes loud the tremors of bodily inter-affectation that escape conscious control.<sup>20</sup>

Yet affect does not exactly communicate: the paradox of a silent din is that it moves but does not speak. While emotion is "intensity owned and recognized" (Massumi 2002, 28), affect is "a-signifying" (Grossberg 1992, 80)—unpossessed and undesignated feeling. As such, it evades discourse and the enculturated reflex that, in the world of *The Unpossessed*, habitually degrades to sentiment any owned and recognized



feeling. Important, though, is that affect is alien—but not opposed—to narrativized emotion. In Slesinger's rendering, the silent din interacts with precisely those private repositories of emotional investment that in other circumstances are censured and quarantined within the personal. Affect, that is, sneaks feeling into interpersonal relations through the back door, and the effect is so radical that the ur-site of sentimentalism, the maternal womb, serves as rallying point for the hardboiled. As a consequence, characters' emotional narratives become charged with a common intensity and anchored to collective feeling.

Such a collectivity is evident in Bruno's reading of the scene as a prospective symphony. Just before the silence sets in, Bruno perceives his friends as a "chorus composed entirely of temperamental first violins," each of whom was "turned inward on himself," each one's strength "bor[ing] like a cancer in the tortured brain; his music bursting and swelling, remained milling and unexpressed in his own private head" (U 75). "Their energies combined would make terrific force, a powerful and vital symphony," but each keeps their energy contained inside. For Bruno, however, "music" and "energy" are interchangeable, suggesting that what individuals contribute to the "symphony" is something like affect. Thus in "Why Can't We have a Magazine?" where energy is leaky, Bruno hears at least a rehearsal of his symphony. The affective "din at the heart of the silence" amounts to a "tuning-up; the gradual gathering of their separate forces . . . [as] the silence grew in volume and intensity" (82).

Margaret's exclamation "God damn it" abruptly breaks the silence, forcing into discourse the common feeling each had experienced privately, and this collision between impersonal intensity and personal emotion prompts collective action. Reintroduced, speech channels shared intensity into shared meaning, and the disparate emotional narratives in the room gradually begin to converge as characters become attuned to each other's inner states. After Margaret's outburst Bruno is able to discern the baby who is not sitting in her lap, seeing Margaret as a "cheated Madonna," and he both sends her the assurance that he has felt her feeling and feels certain she receives his message: "He felt Margaret turning as though she knew herself compassionately addressed" (83). Margaret is indeed thinking of babies, and her passage through "a long dark tunnel" suggests a birth for which Bruno oddly serves as a kind of midwife by "pointing the way" (85). Meanwhile Miles, comically afraid of the word "womb" and distrustful "when people *showed* emotion," takes the exchanges between his friends as a personal affront: "Margaret and Bruno, building this thing against him. It was unspeakable . . . this shaking emotion in his face, this



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dangling the personal before his eyes. . . . His shell was cracking; . . . its splintered points dug sharply in his guts." His shell broken by this antagonistic "thing," Miles surrenders. Echoing Margaret's exclamation, his cry "For God's sake!" triggers her transformation into a divine figure of radiance and creative grace, and a spectacle of affective conversion ensues. The proliferating metaphors—birth, conversion, and symphony—convey analogous feats of creation, all conditioned by collective attunement to feeling, and thus "faster and faster the music played" (87): Margaret lights the room with her (as yet unspoken) decision to have a child; Miles falls (back) in love; Bruno pronounces faith in the magazine; all clamor with hope and excitement; and, outside, the snow the Flinders' neighbor Mrs. Salvemini had predicted falls softly, validating not a meteorological prediction but, rather, an old woman's feeling in her bones.

Thus, while the spoken conversation, ostensibly on the theme of wombs, appears as a curious chain of non sequiturs, the silent exchange—of mental images and emotions—is coherently and more subtly scored for Bruno's affective symphony. Splicing characters' fragments of speech and free indirect discourse in shorter and shorter succession, the impersonal narration quickens the music. As they become more intensively networked narratively, the characters' minds interact more immediately. Whereas the majority of the novel's chapters devote focalization to a single character, "Why Can't We Have a Magazine?" is one of the few to mediate among multiple consciousnesses. During the silence, private meditations occupy long, uninterrupted paragraphs, but, as the chapter progresses, the emotion commutes more rapidly among characters, so that the impersonal narration limns the affective circuitry of the group, mapping its integration through increasingly agile shifts in perspective. Correspondingly, the language places particular emphasis on affective dissemination—on a certain "something . . . in the air" (83), "a click, a contact, something human, real" (84), that "take[s] hold" (85); on the "free give and take" (87) of intensities that "pour" (86) into the atmosphere, "filtered from" one to another, given and "returned . . . ten times over." Even as the "somethings" and "whatevers" suggest uncertainty about what exactly passes between them, the characters are certain of feeling the vectors of affective exchange. These refract and build toward the final pitch of solidarity, registering both as crescendo to Bruno's symphony and as climax to the group's vaguely eroticized exchange of feeling. Narratively, it registers as a tumult of unidentified voices: "'Then we'll meet' 'no, sooner' 'and decide' 'I'll arrange the printers' 'then Wednesday' 'Saturday,'" and so on (87–88).



In these ways, Slesinger associates the chapter's two creative focal points—the incipient magazine and the idea of pregnancy—with freely circulating affect. The terminations of the magazine and the pregnancy are still to come, but this chapter establishes the affective and embodied preconditions that make such things conceivable to begin with—and as such it registers a significant moment of political alternative and a break in the discourse of anti-sentimental radicalism. Notably, Slesinger's version of affective collectivism does not involve “giving one's life away” but suggests rather that, as for Rebecca Pitts, rational commitment depends on something like faith. A better word than faith, however, might be possession: the incorporation of and into an affectively charged idea, cause, or community. Commensurately, intellectuals' boundaries against emotional porousness register as *de facto* refusals to embody the revolution.

*The Unpossessed* thus rewrites the terms of 1930s radical commitment. Slesinger suggests that, at base, commitment must be emotional, embodied, and renewed by interior life, and in doing so she advances an argument in good company with those of other 1930s intellectuals who attempted to formulate a leftist position that would not, through a campaign against individualism, reenact capitalism's liquidation of individuality and affectively centered community.<sup>21</sup> Pointedly, Slesinger's satire identifies the problem with endorsements of impersonality, and in this analysis *The Unpossessed* can be read as novelistic elaboration of Malcolm Cowley's assertion, published in the same month: “The artists will and do take part in [the struggle], because they are men before they are writers or painters, and because their human interests are involved, and because they can't stay out of the battle without deliberately blinding and benumbing themselves” (1934, 300).<sup>22</sup> In stark and prosaic comedy, Slesinger's “empty ghosts” are blinded in exactly that way. They register the novel's critique of radical anti-sentimentalism as an emotionally benumbing discourse ultimately counterproductive to the revolution it attempts to initiate, since it voids the radical's claim to commitment and the individual's claim to personhood.

This final point has implications beyond the question of radical politics. In examining the damage wrought by the programmatic rejection of emotion, Slesinger likewise writes against the grain of an important modernist sensibility, parodying the impulse to reject sentimentalism, without exactly recuperating it. Her anti-anti-sentiment isn't pro-sentiment, that is, but it does align more generally, and unexpectedly, with positive representations of affect found in writers like Gold and Le Sueur. At the same time, in parodying rejection, Slesinger refuses the



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polemic's implicitly gendered trap. Indeed, she puts formal modes aligned with anti-sentimental modernism—satire and impersonal narration—into the service of exposing the polemic's fundamentally coercive affective paradigm. This move is significant, as may be judged by Jonathan Greenberg's insight that "if the sentimental . . . represents what is seen as most coercive about emotion—its mobilization of feeling for the purpose of assimilating affective life to 'dominant cultural attitudes'—then satire is a major, perhaps an essential component of the modernist resistance to such coercion" (2011, 14). Crucially, Slesinger's modernist satire resists coercion, but it is the coercion of anti-sentimentalism itself, as one of the dominant cultural attitudes of her age and cultural milieu. In *The Unpossessed*, anti-sentimentalism becomes the coercive discourse, the threat to authentic feeling that accounts of modernism characteristically associate with its opposite. In declining to inhabit an embodied voice of critique, the narrative remains immersed in this failure of authenticity, duly observing the rules of impersonalizing discourse and manifesting its consequences. The superb mimetic achievement of *The Unpossessed* is to bear numb witness to impersonality's casualties.

## §

Heather Arvidson received a doctorate from the University of Washington and is currently completing a book on the significance of impersonality as a modernist aesthetic and early-twentieth-century cultural keyword.

## Notes

1. On characters' typicality see also Adams 1934; Gregory 1934, 2; Matthews 1934, 52.
2. Slesinger's popularity led to an exceptionally lucrative Hollywood screenwriting contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1935 (Biagi 1977, 231, 234).
3. See Trilling (1966) 1979, 16.
4. The *Menorah* began as a secular, culturally pluralist magazine aligned with the wider Menorah Movement, which started in 1906 as a Harvard student society. The magazine aimed to cultivate a modern, cosmopolitan Jewish community on the basis of ethnic history and humanist philosophy (*Menorah* 1914, 9).
5. *The Unpossessed* will be cited as *U*.



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6. On sentimentalism's persistent appeal in leftist discourse of the 1930s, see Cadle 2014.

7. See Wald 1987, chapter 2.

8. See Abbott 1991, 623; Biagi 1977, 224–36; Dickstein 2009, 512; Pells 1973, 404; Sharistanian 1984, 359–86; Teres 1996, 180–85; and Wald 1987. Rabinowitz (1991) provides a crucial intervention by identifying gendered language and reproductive narratives of 1930s radical culture as discursive contexts for the novel.

9. The *Modern Quarterly* converted to the *Modern Monthly* from 1933 to 1937 and reverted to the the *Modern Quarterly* from 1938 to 1952.

10. See, for instance, Hicks 1933, 5; Wilson 1931a, 234; Gold 1930, 3.

11. In earlier incarnations, “boring from within” typically signified a strategy for infiltrating and radicalizing labor unions (Brissenden 1920; “Red” 1921).

12. See Wald 1987, 116.

13. See, for instance, Hook 1934, 161, 153; Eastman 1933b, 210, 211.

14. On modernism's pejorative collocation of the sentimental with femininity, see Clark 1991 and Felski 1995. In Clark's words, “the term *sentimental* makes a shorthand for everything modernism would exclude” (1991, 9).

15. English editions available in the 1930s used Constance Garnett's 1916 translation, *The Possessed*. The correction of Dostoevsky's title to *Demons* in the latter half of the century makes clear that Dostoevsky's focus was fixed not on his revolutionary antiheroes but rather on the demons that possess them. See Pevear 1994, xvii.

16. See Gibbs 2010; Brennan 2004; Ahmed 2004.

17. On Slesinger's adaptation of devices common in proletarian fiction, see Rabinowitz 1991, 142–50.

18. On the novel's structural pairing of aborted political and personal hopes, see also Sharistanian 1984; Rabinowitz 1991; Castro 2004.

19. As Rabinowitz puts it, Slesinger “exposes . . . even as she reanimates” the essentialism of the Left's dominant metaphors (1991, 150). By contrast, Wald finds the potency of Slesinger's “personal is political” message compromised by essentialism (2002, 96).

20. Strictly speaking, Massumi's affect escapes consciousness, which poses a conundrum for impersonal fiction. Without an omniscient narrative presence, information about feeling is delivered via free indirect discourse; by this logic,



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preconscious affect should slip through the narrative weave. Yet even as affect escapes awareness, its effects surface. As Deborah Gould argues, "Affective sensations, especially when the bodily intensity is concentrated and strong, can stir attempts to figure out what one is feeling" (2010, 32). The affective dynamic described here fits somewhere within the intermediary ambiguity of affects acquiring qualification and entering awareness.

21. See, for instance, Dewey 1930; Frank 1936.

22. Both *The Unpossessed* and Cowley's *Exile's Return* were published in May 1934.

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# The Consolation of Objects in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*

Gregory Castle

"No ideas but in things."

—W. C. Williams

In a fallen world, amid "shattered glass and toppling masonry," Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce's artist hero, seeks to blot out disappointment and fallenness by raising the world back up again (Joyce [1934] 1990, 24).<sup>1</sup> As W. B. Yeats puts it, in "Lapis Lazuli," "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay" (1997, 249). This is Nietzschean *amor fati*, which looks forward to that destiny of rebuilding (again and again), for after the ravages of history, after the "billybombs" and "zeppelins," things are best known when they are shattered, defamiliarized into new existence. The temporality of this shattered being is the future perfect, when fallen things will have had the chance to be "built again" with a new intensity and purpose, founded on the necessity of their fall. This is at bottom a utopian standpoint because it seeks to remake the world:

I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation. And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer. (Nietzsche 2001, 157; my emphasis)



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Nietzsche's desire to "make things beautiful," to move toward a future in which there will be no *looking away*, requires an aesthetics that attends to the futural state of things (*Dinge*), and its most effective (and affective) mode would be lyrical, a mode best suited to temporal ruptures and raptures. But Nietzsche also knows that he "will be one of those who make things beautiful."

The necessity of things (*Dinge*) is not their essence (the Kantian *Ding an sich*, or "noumenon") but their status of *having been made beautiful*.<sup>2</sup> *Amor fati* is both love of necessity and a promise to make the beauty of necessity apparent "some day." This necessity of objects (*Dinge*) is nothing more than their openness to artistic transformation. The point is not to reveal the essence or thingness of the object (*Ding an sich*) but to regard as beautiful what alone is available to us, that is to say, the object or, more precisely, its appearance. This, for Nietzsche, is the legacy of Greek aesthetics. "Oh those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, at the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words,—in the whole Olympus of appearance!" (8). For the affirmative artist (the "Yes-sayer"), the goal is not to get to the bottom of things, to their being or existence, but to stay on the surface.<sup>3</sup> "Looking away" from what is ugly amounts only to a kind of disdain for what has *not yet* been made beautiful, what has *not* been subjected to the artist's transformative gaiety. But even negation is part of the "all in all and on the whole," a totality that tightens the coil of time so that everything springs ahead: "Some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer."

This utopian attitude toward beauty is a hallmark of modernism in Ireland, and it is strongly expressed in Stephen Dedalus's future-oriented aesthetics, which is grounded on his pledge "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce 2007, 224).<sup>4</sup> Such an aesthetics would have to take seriously fallen objects—"toppling masonry" (*U* 24), a "cracked lookingglass" (26), a "tray of Stuart coins" (29), a boy named Cyril, a ghost, a telegram, a lecture, a lamp in a brothel, even ousted possibilities—as a source of consolation, for in them Stephen finds the potential for a futurity that lies precisely in his sensitivity to the way objects offer the promise of their being in the beauty of their necessity and in his ability to grasp and express, in the world of the work, the temporality of deferral that this promise puts into play.



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Nietzschean *amor fati* embraces the necessity of this deferral as a mode of consolation, for by “making things beautiful,” the apprehending subject discovers, in the effort to apprehend an object, an image that is the source of consolation for those who wish to follow the trail of apprehension. By the word “image,” I do not mean what Kant calls “representation,” which “is itself an [inner] intuition” (1965, 77).<sup>5</sup> Representation so understood is a function of the understanding in its production of knowledge. The apprehension of representations consists in their synthesis within a manifold of intuitions, always in a successive fashion; only through a necessary *a priori* operation can the manifold of intuition connect to experience through concepts. In fact, “experience is only possible through a representation of [a] necessary connection of the perceptions” (209).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the *image* is apprehended *in* experience and is the result not of a succession but of a rupture and withdrawal that transforms the object into the productive site of an activity, of a passage open to apprehension (understood as an experience of imaginative perception and transformation of the world of objects). As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, the image is “a thing that is not the thing” (2005, 2); it is “not a form and is not formal. It is what does not show itself but rather gathers itself into itself” (3). Its intimate withdrawal is also a threshold, for the image “is given in an opening that indissociably forms its presence and its separation.”

The gaze of the artist—like that of the philosopher—is meant to apprehend all objects, as if they harbored the potential for beauty in the very necessity of their withdrawal into an image that is given to the apprehending mind. Joyce presents us, in the figure of Stephen Dedalus, with an artist hero who struggles, across two separate novels, to affirm this love of necessity, this love of objects that requires only that we not look away. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen learns about the significance of objects and develops a theory of aesthetics that seeks to unveil their essence (*Ding an sich*). It is not until he reemerges in *Ulysses* (1922) that we begin to see the implications of his exploration into the hidden life of things. For by overcoming the symbolic authority of objects masquerading as things, he frees himself to enjoy their original promise, which lies not in what they *are* but in the act of apprehending them as images: *the act of not looking away*.



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## Objects and things

In Joyce, objects frequently appear simultaneously as mystifying and ordinary, a quality that transposes them onto a lyrical register. As Douglas Mao has pointed out about Pound's poetry, "lyrical 'objects' . . . arrest the attention through their initial incomprehensibility" (1998, 165). In Joyce, this initial incomprehension, which takes the form of an enigma, is typically followed by speculation (made possible by arrested attention) that will stabilize the object and, I would add, make it comprehensible under new conditions of narrative possibility. Take, for example, the scene in *Ulysses* featuring Denis Breen's postcard that no one can interpret: "UP: u.p." (U 158). The postcard serves as a functional component of narrative action (it inaugurates a very minor subplot involving Breen) but gives no sign of meaningful communication.<sup>7</sup> Bloom tries to make sense of the message it conveys by speculating about who might have written it—"I'll take my oath that's Alf Bergan or Richie Goulding. Wrote it for a lark in the Scotch house I bet anything. Round to Menton's office. His oyster eyes staring at the postcard. Be a feast for the gods"—and Alf himself later comments, "Look at him, says he. Breen. He's traipsing all round Dublin with a postcard someone sent him with u. p.: up on it to take a li . . ." (160, 299). What causes him to stop, "doubled up" in laughter, is the spectacle of Breen taking "libel action" for a total enigma: "Ten thousand pounds. . . . God I'd give anything to hear him before a judge and jury." J. J. O'Molloy also tries to stabilize the meaning of the postcard—"A postcard is publication . . . sufficient evidence of malice" (320–21)—but it disseminates in unruly and unpredictable ways, like the pieces of Mr. Reggy's "silly postcard" that Gerty McDowell tears "into a dozen pieces" (362) in "Nausicca" or the "picture postcard" that Murphy passes around in "Eumaeus" (625).

Because Breen seeks in the postcard's meaning a reparation (a legal form of consolation) well out of proportion to the enigmatic message it contains, it can serve no purpose other than to mark his haphazard and futile passage through Dublin. He suffers the enigma of an *object* (*Ding*) that refuses to settle into a stable and significant *thing* (*Ding an sich*) that he can know properly—that is to say, recognize *in itself*. He can't get past what the postcard *is not*—a *thing*—and so he cannot grasp its pivotal role as a mere object. For Breen, as for the reader, the interpretation of the postcard only intensifies its recalcitrance as a specifically *textual* object. Bloom and the others attempt to make sense of the postcard's message but come no closer to its meaning than Breen does with his paranoid investigations.



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Stephen takes quite a different standpoint toward such enigmatic or lyrical objects, an artistic standpoint that allows him to apprehend the transformative potential that lies in the moment when they withdraw into their secret existence as things. Breen can't get past what the postcard *is not*, but this is precisely where Stephen lodges his apprehensive gaze: he sees the alterity, partiality, and reticence of such objects and puts them into play, through artistic apprehension, as images.<sup>8</sup> "As on the first day he bargained with me here," he thinks, standing in front of Mr. Garrett Deasy's desk, in the "Nester" episode of *Ulysses*. "As it was in the beginning, is now. On the sideboard the tray of Stuart coins, base treasure of a bog" (29). As *objects*, the Stuart coins are not merely given; they are part of a commemoration of Protestant Ascendancy triumphalism and the illegitimate Catholic regime it put down.<sup>9</sup> Stephen understands this, but he also understands that such objects offer, in relations of apprehension, a trace of "the impossible-real Thing" (*Ding an sich*).<sup>10</sup> The instability of meaning that enrages Breen and stops him short—the dynamic, doubling, and disruptive quality of the image—structures Stephen's attentive gaze and helps to furnish a new horizon.

I want to suggest that this structuring (the production of an image) follows the trace only of what is *not* the object, specifically, its withdrawal into hidden life. Let us reconsider that postcard. For Breen, as for the reader of *Ulysses*, it is a textual object open to interpretation; its enigmatic character draws our attention to it *as an object*, not as the *thing* Breen most wants it to be. By contrast, Bloom seems to want to accept it as the mere object it appears to be, and contemplates its enigmatic message in terms of its pragmatic or quantifiable existence, as he does when he imagines a motive for sending it.<sup>11</sup> As critics have recently shown, Bloom's relationship to objects is open, empathic, and philosophically realist: he is comfortable with objects, and, in this respect, he is like the *flâneur*, for whom the object world is a paradise of the actual.<sup>12</sup> He is willing to imagine what he cannot know. For example, a door through which he passes is "almost human . . . doing its level best to speak" (121). In some ways, he is quite the opposite of Stephen, who also uses imagination to go beyond what experience tells him, but he tends to approach the object world self-consciously as a source of meaning and significance and comes to regard aesthetic experience of it as the best path toward understanding it. Bloom too is self-consciously absorbed in the object world, but his instinct is to contemplate the mechanics of things. He imagines the object as a kind of articulate contraption—"Everything



speaks in its own way"—while Stephen imagines the object as a form of concealment in plain sight. From Stephen's perspective, Bloom's imagined speech is really an echo of his all-too-human appeal to the object to reveal itself. The transformation of the object (an open door, product of intuition) into an image (a speaking door, product of imagination) is an intrinsically aesthetic process, a form of "human production" that, as Mao puts it, "holds out the possibility of a redemption of Being itself" (1998, 57). Bloom enjoys his role in this process; he likes it when things speak *through him* because he seems to understand that he grants them the right to speak and is flush with their success. He is their advocate and, he would like to think, their equal. His experience is as much about mediation as it is production, as is Stephen's, though the latter will draw out and intensify the aesthetic component of both mediation and production. His relation to objects is quite different and has not been commented on much in the criticism. In *Portrait*, he aims at nothing less than apprehending the essence of things (*Ding an sich*), which, in the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, lies beyond the limits of knowledge; within these limits, I would argue, Bloom feels most happy and secure.<sup>13</sup> Stephen, however, is less interested in what an object (for example, a butcher's boy's basket) *says* to him than in what it means by existing. In this regard, if in no other, he resembles Breen, for Stephen too is entranced by objects and seeks a meaning beyond their mere appearance. He too seeks to solve the riddle they pose simply by existing. But if his juvenile aesthetics leaves him with the impression that he has solved the riddle of objects, his return to Dublin after a year abroad reveals that he had come no closer to a solution than Breen. His return also reveals a way forward insofar as it acknowledges that his prior misunderstandings bear the hallmark of necessity and thereby offer the consolation of beauty: an apprehension of the object (*Ding*) that leaves open the possibility of new meaning based on the process of apprehension itself.

For Mao, such possibilities are legible within a dialectical framework that seeks to bridge philosophical and socioeconomic readings of modernism. If the modernist work "preserves the imperiled particular" (1998, 7), it is because "modernity could be construed as an affair of consciousness gone awry" (8), with the subject growing "rapacious and fantastically powerful" by adopting an increasingly instrumentalist stance toward the object. Modernist autonomy, then, is the expression of a wish to be "beyond the reach of ideology but secure against the material



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consequences of ideological conflicts" (9). This ambivalence is matched by modernist attitudes toward what Mao calls the "test of production" (20–21), which interferes with this autonomy. Hence, an artist like Virginia Woolf sees the "discreet object" as occupying a wholly different world from that of politics, for it stands as "the particular representative or crystallization of non-human Being" (Mao 1998, 17). Mao's Adornoan reading of major modernists like Woolf homes in on a contradiction at the heart of the philosophical problem that modernists confronted: the contradiction between an object that is utterly autonomous and one that is *made* (i.e., apprehended) through perception. As I will indicate below, this contradiction maps onto the central contradiction of art in Adorno's aesthetic theory.

To speak of objects and their "thingness" (their essence, *Ding an sich*) and to speak of this distinction in the context of fictional worlds (the ground of narrative action and affect) is to raise an additional set of questions about the nature and quality of our relations to objects, whether in lived experience or in the pages of a novel. I have been using the terms *object* and *thing* in order to mark an ontological difference, and here I follow Bill Brown, whose discussion of "thing theory" returns us to the Kantian problem of distinguishing between the *phenomena* we can know and the *noumena* we cannot, a problem that has been usefully reinterpreted by phenomenology, particularly in the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Brown, *thingness* is a latency and excess of objects: "Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)" (2001, 5). The thing is something that "lurk[s] in the shadows of the ballroom and continue[s] to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over" (3). Objects leave their "thingly" existence behind in an afterlife seemingly beyond the ken of human knowledge. Brown's interest lies mainly in a form of "interpretive attention" that enables us, as observers (artistic or otherwise), to capture this afterlife and the story objects tell as they withdraw, into their own, ineluctable existence as *things*.<sup>14</sup>

For Brown, the "thing" does not so much rename Kant's *Ding an sich* as assert a new function for it as a component of relational being; for what we call a "thing," according to him, is really a set of orientations, alignments, and interactions that constitute the temporality of the object.



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In short, the object/thing dynamic is fundamentally narrative: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). This relation enables "a different dimension" in narrative, one that presents objects in passage as "figures of thought and of speech" and thereby "reinvests the subject/object dialectic with its temporal dimension." I believe Brown sees this as a *reinvestment* because of the "stereoscopic effect" of his analysis, which casts "one eye on the extraliterary referent, and one on the text" (2003, 16). Narrative provides the scope for the temporality of objects that is somehow proper to them and, because of this propriety (if not priority), these temporal relations differ from those we form with objects in the extraliterary world. In this respect, Brown's notion of "narrative dimension" aligns fairly well with Mikel Dufrenne's conception of the "expressed world" (1966, 135) of the autonomous aesthetic object.<sup>15</sup>

This post-Heideggerian approach to the object/thing conundrum reevaluates the subject's role in the relations of perception and grants or discovers a new level of freedom *for* the object. And that is just the point: freedom is granted or discovered, and always from the point of view of the subject. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1968) refusal to see the object as something given only to the subject—and his concomitant assertion that as the subject gazes at the object, the object gazes back—remains the starting point for many contemporary object-oriented ontologists who attempt to understand the object apart from the hegemony of human subjectivity and intentionality. For some, the question of the object is a question of the egalitarianism of being. "All things equally exist," writes Ian Bogost, "yet they do not exist equally" (2012, 11). Bogost goes so far as to say that "being itself is an object no different from any other" (22). According to this "flat ontology," there is no "hierarchy of being," and certainly no privilege is accorded *human* being.<sup>16</sup> In addition to these ontological investigations, there have been substantial efforts in recent years to address the freedom of the object, its agency or *initiative*. According to the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, an object (*phenomenon*) reveals itself unconditionally in its givenness, in a "pure initiative of appearing" (2002, 175). This is the result of a reversal of the gaze, as Merleau-Ponty had shown, which "redirect[s] intentionality so that it goes from [the phenomenon] to me. The phenomenon not



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only shows *itself* insofar as it makes *itself*," Marion continues, "but it has always already taken the initiative of making *itself* seen, and I always observe it with an insurmountable delay. The *fait accompli* has always annulled, therefore bracketed, the probable transcendent conditions set for phenomenal arising. . . . It is reduced to its pure initiative of appearing" (2002, 174–75).<sup>17</sup> Rephrasing the Kantian dilemma in terms of an object that can be "*itself* seen" only after its self-initiation, still leaves the subject with the task of apprehending *something*. My focus is less on the object understood as "pure initiative of appearing" (a modification of Heideggerian unconcealment) than on the "insurmountable delay," which provides a new object for the artist's apprehension. Since the givenness of objects is withheld from our perception, we must deal with images and with a set of relations, alignments, and orientations that close the gap between one's perception of the object and the impossible futurity of the thing's secret self-fruit. Anything can happen in this interminable delay.

## The destiny of things

The phenomenology of objects lies at the heart of *A Portrait*. From the beginning, Stephen is teased into thought by objects with myriad associations (with slime, damp, cold, heat, sunlight, ivory, gold) that institute a temporality of delay among possible meanings. He can make sense of simple concepts and their relation to objects—"There were two cocks that you turned and water came out: cold and hot"—but is confounded when he realizes that the concepts also cover *himself*: "He felt cold and then a little hot: and he could see the names printed on the cocks. That was a very queer thing" (*P* 9). None of these experiences manifests as the essence of coldness, of coldness *in itself*. This queer relation between concept and objects, between language and feelings, intensifies in chapter 2, when Stephen confronts words *as objects* and thereby forces the issue of significance in much the same way as Breen when confronted with the enigmatic message on the postcard. While visiting his father's old university classroom in Cork, he encounters the word *foetus* carved on a school desk. The experience with this textual object hits him with all the force of a thing's naked essence: "On the desk before him he read the word *Foetus* cut several times in the dark stained wood. The sudden legend startled his blood" (78). In what seems like a "pure initiative of appearing"—a "sudden legend," a graven Word—Stephen in fact



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receives an image, which “sprang up before him out of the word cut in the desk.” A potent lyrical outcry from the world of objects (*Dinge*), this carved fragment alters narrative direction and utterly changes Stephen’s perceptions. For “it shocked him to find in the outer world a trace of what he had deemed till then a brutish and individual malady of his own mind” (79). This shock, which leaves him bereft of being—“He no longer existed” (81)—discombobulates his sense of time and inner life as well as his place within his family and the wider community. He has come to realize how mistaken he was in thinking himself a hero, even of his own *Bildung*. He experiences a *recognition* (the graffito on the desk) that is at the same time a *misrecognition* (he thinks it refers to outlandish desires and transgressions that he has so far only vaguely imagined), but he is too young to know the difference. The word has created a sense of *disorientation* that he cannot yet transform into a productive alternative to the nationalist morality he learns at home, at school, and in the Church.

A textual object like the isolated word *foetus* structures the narrative according to the protagonist’s naive sense of language as forming direct links to the world. Yet this same naive referentiality offers consolation to a boy who has felt, through language, a kinship with the brute materiality of the object world, which sends him into such a panic that he obsessively *renames* himself and his surroundings: “I am Stephen Dedalus. I am walking beside my father whose name is Simon Dedalus. We are in Cork, in Ireland. Cork is a city. Our room is in the Victoria Hotel. Victoria and Stephen and Simon. Simon and Stephen and Victoria. Names” (81). Recitation establishes names as objects to be recognized, as proper and significant, objects that come to the aid of the young boy, who feels cut adrift, separated from his father and his cronies by an “abyss of fortune or temperament” (83). Whether he invokes street names or Percy Shelley’s poetry, words connect with a vital sense of being in the world. Shelley’s vision of interstellar loneliness (“Wandering companionless . . .”) allows him to “forget his own human and ineffectual grieving.” If an ordinary object (graffito on a desk) casts him into existential panic, an imaginary one, the image of a “barren shell of the moon” (84), offers the consolation of poetry as a form of self-forgetting.

Linguistic or textual objects like the word *foetus*, Shelley’s moon, and Breen’s postcard exemplify the process of apprehending the excessive significance of objects in general. Joyce provides a tutorial on this process in his use of the word *ivory*, which designates different objects at different points of Stephen’s development. As a boy, he associates it with



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a girl's hands and realizes not only what her hands feel like but that he *understands* the link between her hands and an icon of the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary: "Eileen had long white hands . . . long and white and thin and cold and soft. That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory*" (31). This religious association is repeated and eroticized in Stephen's apprehension of the bird-girl, whose thighs are "softhued as ivory" (150). In this instance, he is *adding* significance gained from experience to what he already knows. As he gets older, he comes to understand the complexity of words and their (lack of) references and draws less on the tactile sensation of the *object* ivory than on the pleasures of the abstract *concept* the word designates, a process of which he is no less self-conscious than when he experienced the cold softness of Eileen's hands: "The word now shone in his brain, clearer and brighter than any ivory sawn from the mottled tusks of elephants. *Ivory, ivoire, avorio, ebur*" (156). From object to concept, *ivory* traces out a general trend in Stephen's development toward abstraction—and toward more cunning misprisions—and away from the sense of terror associated with words that had intruded upon his boyish inner life, giving objective reality to what were his most secret fantasies. He discovers too that words can deceive, they can make their appearance as the hallmark of things (*Ding an sich*), when they are in fact like Breen's postcard, enigmatic objects that masquerade as things: in a word, *pseudo-things*.

These textual examples illustrate the kind of epiphany that Stephen comes to expect of objects in the world: words and things are meant to *shine in his brain*, their essence or *quidditas* is meant to be clearer and brighter than any mere objective vestment they might wear. They are meant to prepare him, and the reader, for the revelation that ends chapter 4, when his gaze falls on a girl who becomes, for him, "the advent of the life that had cried to him" (150). In her marmorean stillness, she takes on the character of an enigmatic object (she is, for him, the figure of enigma), and he longs to know what she *stands for*: "She *seemed* like one whom magic had changed into the *likeness* of a strange and beautiful seabird" (my emphasis).<sup>18</sup> Of course, he is the magician here, and the sign of his conjuring is the use of *seemed* and *likeness*, words that blur the boundary between what the girl appears to be and what Stephen, as gazing subject, imagines her to be, her *semblance*. In this performative moment, before he has started to theorize, his relation to her is immediate and given, if only in a flash, before his own artistic gaze begins its work of mediation. When he gazes at her on the strand, he singles her out as one of several



“gayclad lightclad figures of children and girls”; he then apprehends her as something magical, a “seabird,” and from there he generates an image that “passe[s] into his soul for ever.” Stephen enacts what he will later theorize in his dialogue with Lynch—the three moments of apprehension—but there is something more to the process that is suppressed later: the moment when the girl “quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them toward the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither.” In the next sentence, he calls out “Heavenly God! . . . in an outburst of profane joy” that signals not so much a new mystical access to essence but the shock of withdrawal itself, which introduces the possibility of a response to his gaze, a possibility that is endlessly delayed.

By the time he is at university, Stephen’s relation to objects has resulted in a bifurcated sensibility: on the one hand, he is hypersensitive to the object world around him and seems to process it without undue symbolic interpretation. Hence, chapter 5 opens with objects seemingly in their ordinary given appearance—the “watery tea” and “crusts of fried bread,” the “box of pawn-tickets” (151), his own “greasy fingers” (152), a list of items recently pawned. On the other hand, this same hypersensitivity resolves itself into an aesthetic method that seeks to pierce the veil of the object’s implacable appearance and put a halt to the opening up, to the possibility of colliding worlds, that the girl on the strand portends. In the aesthetic theory that he lays out in the final chapter, Stephen seeks the essence or *quidditas* of things. Through an act of phenomenological reduction, which takes the form of an apprehending gaze, he strips away the objectivity of the world, and then of the object itself, arriving finally at its luminous and irreducible core. The stages of artistic apprehension that he outlines in his dialogue with Lynch cannily misrecognize the temporality of withdrawal (a production of the artist’s perception and imagination) for an initiative *on the part of the object*. To apprehend an object, the artist must first recognize its wholeness, its existence as an object separate from other objects; then he must recognize the object’s complexity and multiplicity before finally recognizing the “*whatness* of a thing,” its absolute being *and* its absolute negation: “*that thing which it is and no other thing*.”<sup>19</sup> Stephen’s goal is to apprehend the object “as a thing” in order “to see” its radiance, its *quidditas*, which he believes can be “apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony” (187).



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This moment of arrestment halts the object in its existence so that the artist might have a starting point for the production of an image. When Stephen talks, albeit briefly, about the forms of literary expression served by apprehension, we see evidence not of essence but of an opening to the world that harkens back to the scene on the strand and looks forward to the villanelle. He explains to Lynch that the artist using a lyrical form "presents his image in immediate relation to himself" (188). His description emphasizes the simplicity and immediacy of an outcry in the ineluctable struggle with objects: "The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion, a rhythmical cry such as ages ago cheered on the man who pulled at the oar or dragged stones up a slope" (189). The other forms, epic and dramatic, emerge from this initial outcry, and the personality of the artist "passes into the narration itself" before "refin[ing] itself out of existence." Stephen is describing literary history, but he is also describing the different manifestations of the "esthetic image," up to and including the point at which the "personality of the artist . . . impersonalises itself." Even at its most "impersonalised," the "esthetic image" remains bound to the artist's inner world, for in the dramatic form it is "life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination." By virtue of the capacity for imagination to govern the entire process, the artist remains bound to the object world that first elicited "the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion."

The villanelle Stephen composes just after these scenes gives us some sense of how the various manifestations of the "esthetic image" work together to create the aesthetic object. If the poem appears to confirm his heretical aesthetic theory, which divorces the creator and his life world from his creation, Joyce's presentation of the poem's composition *in situ*—a languorous and erotic recollection of E. C. that enfolds Stephen "like waters circumfluent in space" (196)—brings into play the very experience of the creator that his theory seeks to remove from the work. The outside world is invited into the inner life of the young poet, but on sufferance; for at this point, Stephen feels he must exclude "sluggish matter" by purifying and reprojecting it, transforming it through artistic means into "imperishable being." He had misrecognized the girl in the strand just as he misrecognizes E. C. in the villanelle, and for the same reason: because to do otherwise would be to destroy the efficacy of the image he formed of both in a moment of epiphany.



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Joycean epiphany has long been thought of as a process whereby a common object takes on an uncommon and mysterious significance, “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Joyce 1959, 211). Stephen’s example of “the clock of the Ballast Office” in *Stephen Hero* is an epigrammatic or lyrical version of the aesthetic theory he develops analytically in *A Portrait*: “All at once I see it and *I know at once what it is*: epiphany.” As the capstone of a quest to know *what an object really is*, epiphany is a sophisticated form of misrecognition, a way of seeing the object as it *really is not* that, as Oscar Wilde has shown, both serves the ends of absolute Beauty and makes up for the inevitable failure of the artist to unveil the beautiful object’s radiant core.<sup>20</sup> Stephen discovers, in the year following his self-exile, that the fundamentally withdrawn and dissembling nature of objects is both their truth and their utility. He learns that epiphany is less the revelation of an essence than the production of an image in aesthetic apprehension, a *dialectical image* that memorializes the interminable delay of the object’s self-reference.<sup>21</sup>

According to Walter Benjamin, dialectical images are not meant to stand for an object but to serve as their own “historical index,” one which says that images “belong to a particular time” but above all that “they attain to legibility only at a particular time. . . . Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time” (1999, 462–63; see also 453, 473–78). Back in Dublin, Stephen no longer strives to know the essence of a thing or to enjoy a primal moment of recognition; rather, he seeks, through the image to reorient himself with respect to objects—especially significant or symbolic objects (pseudo-things)—by creating new conditions of recognizability for them. Misrecognition has a vital role to play in this process, for the object stands in for and redeems a thing that can no longer be recognized or made legible by the artist *except* by recourse to an image, which, by virtue of its dialectical character, is never congruent with either object or thing to which it refers. The image is a confluence of temporalities, “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the Now (*Jetztzeit*) to form a constellation”—so that, in short, “image is dialectics at a standstill” (Benjamin 1999, 463). The dialectical image is a mediating element that indexes the historicity of the object, its layered meanings and uses, and frees it for new significations. Such an image



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does not show itself but rather “assembles and gathers into itself by going beyond the whole order of signs” (Nancy 2005, 24) in order to register its passage. The idea that consolation arrives through the apprehension of objects in their givenness involves coming to an understanding of givenness consisting not simply in the objectivity of the object but also in its historical provenance, in the temporality of its withdrawal into itself (into its nonobjective “thingness”).

## Paying attention

The measure of Stephen Dedalus's development as an artist is precisely the distance he travels from the idealism of the aesthetic theory as presented in *Portrait* to the practice of artistic attentiveness that we see in *Ulysses*. “Telemachus” presents us with an artistic hero who has returned to the site of his most grandiose aspirations, determined to fight against the aesthetic ideals to which he had fallen prey; to this extent, Stephen remains in the narrative and symbolic mode of the *Bildung*-plot left unfinished in *Portrait*. His quest for the essence of things, for the “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (*P* 224) that he so ardently desired at the end of *Portrait*, is grimly sent up in Mulligan's clownish restaging of symbolic action. He has resisted every temptation to be guided by the pseudo-things his friend brandishes, such as the “bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed” (*U* 3), so suggestive of the sacred objects in a Catholic Mass (the chalice) or in ritual slaughter (razor).<sup>22</sup> Along with other elements of the opening scene, including the Martello Tower in which they live, Mulligan's robes, and his recitation of fragments of the Mass, the bowl and razor contribute to a complex mimicry of the sacraments, while references to the Greeks and Algernon Swinburne suggest a pagan spirit behind the mimicry. Stephen consistently deflates these pretensions, which surrounded him before his year in Paris and which seek to surround him once again. To some extent, Mulligan is self-deflating: he portentously holds up a mirror—“a half circle in the air to flash the tidings abroad in sunlight now radiant on the sea” (6)—only to confess that he pilfered it from a “skivvy.” Stephen further devalues it as a symbol precisely by making it “a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.” Mulligan's remark that Stephen has the “cursed jesuit strain . . . only it's injected the wrong way” (8) underscores just how far (but no farther) the latter has come. He seems still to be trapped in



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the heretical persona—secular priest of art—that he fashioned for himself in *Portrait*, within the very symbolic systems he wishes to reject, though in Mulligan's chastisement we see the frustration of a dilettante who has encountered a genuine iconoclast finally coming into his own.

In "Telemachus," objects are invested with a traditional symbolic value; but accompanying this investment is a mimic devaluation of the consolation offered by the object as a symbol. Mulligan's bowl and razor are prominent examples, as is the "snotgreen sea" (5). We see this mode of deflation with respect to people as well, insofar as they appear to Stephen as pseudo-things. Stephen gazes upon the woman who brings and pours the milk, for example, but looks past the person she is, with her "old shrunkened paps" (13), and sees the *Shan Van Vacht*, a version of the ancient Sovereignty figure that holds the promise of Irish autonomy. He imagines her "by a patient cow at daybreak in a lush field," a thoroughly imaginary object in a thoroughly imaginary world. She is a symbolic multitude: "a witch on her toadstool," "silk of the kine and poor old woman," a "wandering crone," a "common cuckquean," "a messenger from the secret morning" (13–14). But intruding upon Stephen's imaginative meditations are the hard economic realities of her life: doling out milk for men who do not pay all that they owe. "Time enough, sir," she tells them, "taking the coin. Time enough" (15). An economic transaction is bound up with symbolic consolations of the *otherworld* (the old woman comes from the fairy world and so there is indeed "time enough") meant as balm for the wounds of *this* world. The same dynamic is at play in Stephen's dealings with the Englishman Haines, only in this case his own words, archly significant and shaped into epigrams, become pseudo-things. Haines wants to make a collection of his "sayings"—which he finds to be "deuced good"—but Stephen insists on regarding them as commodities for the market: "Would I make money by it?" he asks (16). The quest for symbolic value in these scenes is baldly translated into an economic exchange in which the object (Stephen's sayings, milk) becomes a mere commodity, rendered into an abstract value in exchange.

Everything of importance in "Telemachus" gets its comeuppance and nothing more powerfully than the ghost of Stephen's mother, which has haunted his dreams: "She had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes" (5). Throughout the episode,



and indeed throughout *Ulysses*, the *sure thing*, the *real thing* of a mother's love is threatened by its decomposition into the merely objective—a bowl of “green sluggish bile . . . torn up by her rotting liver”—or its transfiguration into a revenant bent on reproach, a horrifying Gothic pseudo-thing compounded of ashes, wax, and rosewood. Mulligan sings a few lines of Yeats's “Who Goes With Fergus?”—a poem that offers, much as the milkwoman does, the fairy otherworld as an alternative to earthly brooding on “hopes and fears”—and leaves Stephen alone on the tower roof, where he gazes out to the sea, thinking of his mother “crying in her wretched bed” (9). He recalls objects whose value only she could estimate: “Her secrets: old featherfans, tasselled dancecards, powdered with musk, a gaud of amber beads in her locked drawer. A birdcage hung in the sunny window of her house when she was a girl” (9–10). In these small details, these memorial images, we have proof of May Dedalus's vital humanity; but the consolation they offer is no proof against a return of the ghost, “her hoarse loud breath rattling in horror,” more than ever an abject pseudo-thing, lacking any vestige of humanity. Her appeal is that of death, and Stephen can only reply, “Let me be and let me live” (10). By the end of the episode, with the prayer for the dying (“*Liliata rutilantium*”) echoing in his mind, Stephen realizes that he can never return home, and so he leaves his key with Mulligan, the “Usurper” (24), who will continue with his comic reversals that amount to running in place within the existing order of things.

In *Ulysses*, objects fall into place, but not necessarily for Stephen. Their sole initiative is to refuse to *be there* for him in their naked essence (*Ding an sich*). In return, he refuses to be disenchanted with this refusal, which confirms that the *quidditas* of objects is no longer the point of artistic attention—or, rather, that it can only be an *a priori* starting point, the unknowable precondition for apprehending the object *in passing* and *for art* (for thought, for reflection). Stephen comes to terms with objects as being there in the way that he now needs them to be: as anchor-points (*points de capiton*) for his aesthetic apprehension, which allow him to reorient his intentions toward his environment.<sup>23</sup> When he apprehends an object—that is, when he has produced an image—he no longer seeks its essence; he seeks its aura, by which term I mean the historical index of his own apprehension of its afterlife.<sup>24</sup> By looking away from essence, the artist is free to re-create the world through the power of attention rather than through the mystical agency of the sacraments that had driven his



identity as a “priest of the eternal imagination” (*P* 195). When, in *Ulysses*, he willfully and creatively misrecognizes an object as a thing in artistic apprehension, the result is not an error, for he does not desire the truth (understood as essence or *quidditas*) of an object he perceives so much as abet its withdrawal into existence by indexing the moment when the symbolic investments others have made on its surface fall away and he is given the opportunity to make his own more *timely* investments.<sup>25</sup> Objects offer him the gift of time, the temporality of their withdrawal, which is both the interminable delay of unconcealment *and* the decisive moment of action for the apprehending artist, who creates new temporal conditions for the object, a new ground for its recognizability.

Benjamin tells us that “history decays into images, not into stories,” and in a dialectical image he figures a redemptive historical materialism in terms of rubble at the feet of an angel, whose back is turned to the future toward which it is propelled (1999, 476).<sup>26</sup> Stephen too faces the “shattered glass and toppling masonry” (*U* 24) of a past forsaken by progress and faces it with an eye toward the consolation offered by objects to the artist engaged in (re-)creating a world. After going through the gauntlet of haunted and haunting, mocked and mocking pseudo-things in “Telemachus,” he finds, in “Nestor,” that objects console him more readily, offer him a more finely tuned purchase on his own awareness of the world, to the point that he shrugs off the idea of *quidditas*, with its teleological temporality, in which he once so ardently believed.<sup>27</sup> I think Joyce uses a schoolhouse as the setting for “Nestor” because the classroom had been, in *Portrait*, the site of Stephen’s most traumatic *and* inspiring formative challenges. On this new pedagogical site, he learns how to regard objects as images on his horizon that persistently index their own passage, their own “intimate force” (Nancy 2005, 5). Such opportunities for reflection and rectification come to serve his own aspirations in ways that “nationality, language, religion” (*P* 179) do not.

## A disappointed bridge

“Nestor” opens on a note of historical decorum when Cochrane, one of Stephen’s students, responds correctly with “Tarentum” (the query being, what city sent Pyrrhus?); but the episode quickly devolves into a pedagogical farce. The name “Pyrrhus” is misheard: “A pier, sir, Armstrong said. A thing out in the water. A kind of a bridge. Kingstown pier, sir” (*U*



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24). As the students laugh, "bracelets tittering in the struggle" (25) Stephen agrees. "Yes, a disappointed bridge."<sup>28</sup> A "disappointed" object that cannot become a thing (like Breen's postcard) serves lyrically as a staging ground for reflection on other forms of disappointment, not the least in himself. For just after he utters the phrase, he thinks, "For Haines's chapbook. No-one here to hear. Tonight deftly amid wild drink and talk, to pierce the polished mail of his mind. What then? A jester at the court of his master, indulged and disesteemed, winning a clement master's praise" (25). The specter of self-disappointment drives him further into reflection on time and its failure to allow some appointed destinies to flourish: "Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death. They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted." Stephen's ontology of potentiality, drawn from Aristotle's distinction between the potential and the actual, effectively posits the existence of events that never happen. The broader ramifications should be clear: if existence has nothing to do with an object's revelation of *quidditas*, and if reflection on potentiality confers upon the possible a quantum of being, then it follows that existence is located in the *apprehension of a possibility*, in the mere promise of being, which is, as Nancy and Benjamin aver, the promise of the image. An ousted possibility, like a disappointed bridge, is not without a future.

Stephen is still distracted by ghosts, but they do not cry out for negation, as the ghost of his mother did; instead, they urge him to reflect. He recalls "the studious silence of the library of Saint Genevieve where he had read, sheltered from the sin of Paris, night by night" (25) and learned about the soul as the ultimate thing: "Tranquility sudden, vast, candescent: form of forms" (26). So understood, the soul triumphs over the mere object world of sensation ("the form of sensibles") and, in its serene tranquility, escapes the cascade of objects—"the fox burying his grandmother under a hollybush" (27)—that structures knowledge as a riddle.<sup>29</sup> His attitude toward objects now, his way of apprehending them *not as things* but, as Bill Brown suggests, as objects in relation to himself, means that no object is ever the *thing* that it is, much less the "form of forms."

In "Nestor," Stephen comes to realize that every object, even the most abstract and lofty, is a "shout in the street," a lyrical outburst from the world incarnate, "where sharp voices [are] in strife" (*U* 32). Everything invites the artist to attend upon it, but nothing offers more



than a promise. Stephen's attention to objects ousted from time—from formative possibilities—redeems them because he apprehends them as new images, granting them a level of recognition unavailable to them as “ousted.” Moreover, he begins to see himself in relation to others rather than seeing the other as a mere object, a *figure* on his horizon. He had almost accomplished this with the girl on the strand; he is more successful in a scene with one of his students, Cyril Sargent:

Ugly and futile: lean neck and thick hair and a stain of ink, a snail's bed. Yet someone had loved him, borne him in her arms and in her heart. But for her the race of the world would have trampled him underfoot, a squashed boneless snail. She had loved his weak watery blood drained from her own. Was that then real? The only true thing in life? His mother's prostrate body the fiery Columbanus in holy zeal bestrode. (27)

Stephen's self-conscious intellectualizing may lead some readers to forget the possibility that he, like Cyril, is one of the ousted, recently drawn back to the quagmire of colonial affections and alliances. This may be why Cyril is so attractive to him: he serves as a reminder and—because it is not his experience on which he reflects—an open displacement of his own social status. “Like him was I, these sloping shoulders, this gracelessness. My childhood bends beside me. . . . Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts: secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants, willing to be dethroned” (26). Cyril is an “ugly and futile” object, marked by a “stain of ink,” which subtracts him from himself, leaving him a “squashed boneless snail.” When Stephen asks, “The only true thing in life?” we suspect that he speaks of a *mother's love*, a reading that *A Portrait* supports.<sup>30</sup> But the question redounds upon Cyril as well, for his squashed-snail selfhood is redeemed by the image of the mother's sacrifice to “fiery Columbanus”: “She had saved him from being trampled underfoot and had gone, *scarcely having been*” (27–28, my emphasis). Her nonexistence makes his existence possible; the sacrifice of her life is enough to keep a “squashed boneless” thing alive. Stephen's relation to Cyril becomes an essential part of an aesthetic process of empathic understanding that entwines the student's present moment with the intellectual framework his teacher imaginatively invokes when he calls upon “fiery Columbanus” (27), “Shakespeare's ghost” (28), “mocking mirrors,” “swaddlingbands,” and mathematical symbols moving “in grave morice.” Cyril allows Stephen a moment of self-reflection, a peek into the “dark palace” of his own heart, a part of himself that is otherwise papered over with citations and



"acquired speech" (*P* 166). Though "ugly and futile," he provokes his teacher into paying attention, he provokes his gaze, he challenges him *not to look away*. This scene allegorizes Stephen's new attitude toward others in the world much as the girl had in *Portrait*, whose withdrawn gaze marks the precise moment at which Stephen recognizes his own "profane joy" (150).

This new attitude toward objects and others in the world—one that recovers them as part of a new sensorium for experience and for aesthetics—is a direct rebuke to the grand narratives of history that reverberate throughout the episode.<sup>31</sup> Attending to Cyril primes Stephen for his meeting with Deasy in the sense that it readies him to be distracted by objects, to be inducted into their secret temporalities:

Stale smoky air hung in the study with the smell of drab abraded leather of its chairs. As on the first day he bargained with me here. *As it was in the beginning, is now.* On the sideboard the tray of Stuart coins, base treasure of a bog; *and ever shall be.* And snug in their spooncase of purple plush, faded, the twelve apostles having preached to all the gentiles: *world without end.*" (*U* 29, my emphasis)

Like the basket in *Portrait*, the "tray of Stuart coins" communicates its *integritas* and *consonantia* to the artist; but there is no *claritas*. The coins function as provocations to Stephen's artistic attention; but in this, they differ little from the Eucharist in the villanelle or Mulligan's bowl and razor. What differs is Stephen's relation to them. The language of the "Gloria Patri" frames a presentation of historically inscribed objects that seem to await their levitation into a thingness they already possess as pure potentiality, prior to any inscription. The hymn insinuates into Stephen's apprehension a temporality of simultaneity—"as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be"—that strips the coins and spoons of their bogus symbolic meaning. His artistic apprehension is thus a deliberate misrecognition of them, in defiance of their exhibition value as tokens of Protestant triumphalism, a defiance that creates a new climate of recognizability.

The coins are especially important because they reorient Stephen's engagement with their collector, Mr. Deasy. As significant objects (or pseudo-things) they are overburdened, for they signify not only currency debasement but political and religious defeat. They are stamped with the signature of state power at a particular time (they are *Stuart* coins), the mark of an original condition of recognizability. The history of



James II and the struggle to retain the British throne tells itself on their surface: they are inscribed with the motto "CHRISTO—VICTORE—TRIUMPHO" (Christ in Victory and in Triumph) (Gifford and Seidman 1989, 34). Because they are named in this way, they acquire a double value: for in addition to their monetary value there is added value in the stamped inscription, which serves as an overt entry in the historical index of the coins. Both values are deflated, also doubly: initially, as *species*, by virtue of debasement; later, as exhibits, by virtue of being relegated to a sideboard, "base treasure of a bog" (U 29). Like Breen's postcard and the graven word *foetus*, the coins are duplicitous objects: they are not, at the moment Stephen apprehends them, what they seem. They are real, and they have a place in Irish history, just as they have their place in Deasy's study, as proof of his Orange Unionism. They also have a place on Stephen's horizon, for while he cannot return the coins and spoons to their proper time—the homeland of their first recognition—he can transform them in imagination in a way that offers to once-glorified objects a new context of eternity: "*and ever shall be.*" As "base treasure of a bog," they occupy a zone of temporal indistinction in which objects, even debased and inferior ones, preserve the lineaments of their being, poised to re-present themselves as images to be given to experience as new appearances, like the flaring up of a long simmering peat fire.

Joyce does not let us lose sight of the fact that we know these objects only through Stephen's access to and relation with them, as he casts a restless gaze around a cluttered and claustrophobic study. The artist apprehends Deasy's environment in a mood of willful misprision, which is not to say misapprehension, that makes possible a line of resistance to exhibited objects and the symbolic meanings that have calcified on their surfaces. We see this process at work when Stephen collects his wages. Mr. Deasy lets a sovereign fall, "bright and new, on the soft pile of the tablecloth":

—Money is power, when you have lived as long as I have.  
I know, I know. If youth but knew. But what does Shakespeare  
say? *Put but money in thy purse.*

—Iago, Stephen murmured. (29–30)

As we have seen, money is a pseudo-thing *par excellence*, an object valued for its ability to redeem all value. Deasy's genuine sovereign compensates for the fraudulent Stuart coins; indeed, the conjunction of a "bright and new" coin on top of "two notes, one of joined halves" (29) serves



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as a powerful dialectical image of the way the real thing (gold) trumps representation (notes, *species*). But this easy victory doesn't convince Stephen, who sees the gold, like the Stuart coins, as a pseudo-thing more or less useful to his apprehensive gaze: misrecognition structures critique by appropriating, for tactical reuse, the very thing under scrutiny. Money is traitorous, beguiling, seductive, a deadly fetish: "Iago." Like the Stuart coins, the sovereign brings into play Deasy's Unionism, but it also implicates him in an economic bond with a Catholic intellectual who rejects his employer's authority and who will end up squandering his wages later in the day. Stephen's future hinges on this exchange, in which objects enter into circulation, so that they might remain suspended in the work of consumption that allows them only an abstract objectivity, but also so that he might grab hold of them, apprehend them *as images*—things that are *not* things as Nancy says—and thereby clarify and bolster his resistance to Deasy's totalizing line of thought.

Deasy's Stuart coins, his apostle spoons, all the things (*Dinge*) exhibited in his study—Stephen strips them all of their sedimented trophy value and subjects them to a new aesthetic condition of recognizability. By doing this, he does not bear witness to the essence of *things*; rather he produces images of objects that have, essentially, come alive briefly enough to shock him into a new recognition; and while the artist necessarily misses the mark, it is precisely his *misrecognitions*—preserved in the images garnered in apprehension—that offer an index of the object's uncanny withdrawal.

One of the most dramatic instances of this process occurs as Deasy bloviates on the politics of cattle and Stephen meditates on the pictures of race horses that seem to offer themselves up to him: "Framed around the walls images of vanished horses stood in homage, their meek heads poised in air: lord Hastings' Repulse, the duke of Westminster's Shotover, the duke of Beaufort's Ceylon, *prix de Paris*, 1866. Elfin riders sat them, watchful of a sign. He saw their speeds, backing king's colours, and shouted with the shouts of vanished crowds" (32). Stephen does not settle easily into the imagined world of "framed . . . images" that testify to Deasy's Englishness and his sense of proprietary sportsmanship; like the bright gold sovereign, they allow Deasy symbolically to "back[ ] king's colours." Also, like the sovereign they are pseudo-things and, like the Stuart coins and apostle spoons, they are exhibited objects, raised above "ordinary signifying objects," leaving them vulnerable to artistic apprehension (Dufrenne 1966, 129). In Stephen's gaze, the "elfin riders" and the horses at "their speeds" become something quite different:



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emblems of the enigma he has been struggling with since he was a boy. The horses are concealed ("vanished") and revealed ("in homage") simultaneously in a dialectical image that serves to clarify neither the *thing* unconcealed nor the significant *objects* framed and painted on Deasy's wall. Stephen does not so much occupy this pictorial world as collide with it; his own inner life becomes entangled with the world of the work, which he commandeers for his own expressive needs, just as he commandeered the coins and spoons and even Cyril as objects for his own artistic purposes. In one sense, Stephen is like the riders in the picture, "watchful of a sign," alert to anyone who "backs [his] colours"; but in another sense, his attention to the paintings places him in the world of what he apprehends. Though framed on the wall, the images of "vanished horses" seem poised to emerge out of their estrangement, and this provokes from him a lyrical outcry—he "shouted with the shouts of vanished crowds"—for he too in that moment has "vanished," withdrawn into what cannot be known.

In *A Portrait*, Stephen had committed himself to the apprehension of the object in order to see its radiance, its *quidditas*. In "Nestor," he is caught up amid objects that communicate the arrested harmony (*consonantia*) of their arrangement in a constellation that includes his apprehension of them.<sup>32</sup> In this mood of aesthetic apprehension—in which his shouts are joined with the painted shouts of others—narrative is disrupted and multiplied by objects whose recalcitrance and negativity (their necessity) lie precisely in a form of self-exposure that manages to remain reticent: "vanished horses," with "their meek heads poised in air." Stephen's assessment of Deasy's object world takes on a lyrical otherworldly cast when he apprehends it in a deliberately aesthetic way and thereby eludes the strong narrative currents that would otherwise force him toward "one great goal, the manifestation of God" (*U* 34). Fallen objects—a disappointed bridge, a squashed snail, debased coins, "elfin riders," ousted possibilities—reorient his formative energies away from prescribed lines of development and provide the raw material for a utopian alternative, secular and aesthetic, to the "nightmare of history."

The artist, as Stephen fashions himself, is meant to create new grounds of recognition for objects, to keep building up the world through artistic apprehension in order to make a new future for objects possible. He understands Nietzsche's *amor fati*, understands that necessity trumps faith and that the creative power of the artist must triumph over the deadening force of idealism. To awaken from history's nightmare, Stephen must fashion his own temporality, one that draws out and redeems what



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Benjamin calls a "moment of awakening," which "would be identical with the 'now of recognizability,' in which things put on their true—*surrealist*—face" (1999, 464). The object is redeemed by the artist, and the artist is consoled by the image that captures this redemption. Stephen gains control over his own images, his own power as an artist to imagine new conditions of recognizability in which what has been ousted or set aside can find its emergence in time.

"Nestor" ends, as it begins, on a world-historical note but in a lyrical arrangement that illustrates this surreal emergence. Deasy asks if Stephen knows why Ireland was "the only country which never persecuted the jews":

—Because she never let them in, Mr Deasy said solemnly.<sup>33</sup>

A coughball of laughter leaped from his throat dragging after it a rattling chain of phlegm. He turned back quickly, coughing, laughing, his lifted arms waving to the air. . . .

On his wise shoulders through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins. (U 36)

The dialectical image of the dancing coins—a "moment of awakening" that is also a "caesura in the movement of thought" (Benjamin 1999, 473, 475)—serves comically to ou(s)t Deasy's casual anti-Semitism, which Joyce represents in terms of abjection. He translates his unpalatable attitudes ("England is in the hands of the jews. . . . Wherever they gather they eat up the nation's vital strength") into a rank sensorium: a "coughball of laughter" dragging a "rattling chain of phlegm" (U 33, 36).

In startling contrast, the "sun flung spangles" and "dancing coins" are lyrical outbursts: ephemeral, gratuitous and excessive, like the "wild sea money" that Stephen feels beneath his feet in "Proteus": "Crush, crack, crick, crick . . . Dominie Deasy kens them a" (37). But they are no more or less valuable than the Stuart coins or the sovereign or the word *ivory* in helping the artist gain a purchase on the world. We see this throughout *Ulysses*, as the artist banks on his own earlier reflections—on base treasures and hollow shells—and he ends by regarding them as cogent and productive misrecognitions, consolations, however fleeting, for his sense of dispossession. No longer driven by the urgency of unveiling the *quidditas* of things or knowing the "one great goal" of time, Stephen, like Nietzsche, opens himself to *amor fati*, the desire to "see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them," and to the transformative gaiety that empowers the artist to build the world back up again.



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Gregory Castle is professor of British and Irish literature at Arizona State University. In addition to essays on Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Stoker, Wilde and other Irish modernists, he has published *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, and the *Literary Theory Handbook*. He has edited the *Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, Volume 1 and the *History of the Modernist Novel*. With Patrick Bixby, he has edited Standish O'Grady's *Cuchulain: A Critical Edition*, and they are currently coediting *A History of Irish Modernism* (Cambridge University Press). He continues to work on the Bildungsroman and the temporalities of Irish Revival.

## Notes

1. Joyce's *Ulysses* will be cited in the text as *U*.
2. The German term *Ding* (object, thing) is typically used to refer to what I am calling "object": the material object that exists for us, is given to us, through experience, that is, through our senses. The Kantian term *Ding an Sich* refers to what cannot be known through our sensual experience: "A thing in itself cannot be known through mere relations," Kant writes; "and we may therefore conclude that since outer sense [that which belongs to space] gives us nothing but mere relations, this sense can contain in its representation only the relation of an object to a subject, and not the inner properties of the object in itself" (1965, 87). Kant also uses the term "noumenon" to refer the thing in itself. "If by 'noumenon' we mean a thing so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it, this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense of the term. But if we understand by it an object of a *non-sensible intuition* [i.e., noumenon in its *positive* sense], we thereby presuppose a special mode of intuition, namely the intellectual, which is not that which we possess, and of which we cannot comprehend even the possibility" (268). There can be no transcendent (i.e., non-sensible) "grasp" of the thing in itself. I propose, in the argument below, a middle ground in which the image is produced in the process of aesthetic apprehension, as perception moves from the mere object given to our senses in experience along a trail it leaves in the imagination once the object has disappeared from view into its own hidden existence.
3. Heidegger uses the word *existence* to describe Dasein's being: "The 'substance' of human being is not the spirit as the synthesis of the body and soul, but *existence*" (1996, 110). If we derive it from the Latin *etymon* (*existere*), *to exist* means "to appear, to rise from the dead, to come forward, present oneself, to prove to be (of a given character), to come into being, arise, in post-classical



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Latin also to be" (*ex*- "forth" + *sistere* "to cause to stand") ("exist, v." *OED*).

4. Joyce's *Portrait* will be cited in the text as *P*.

5. Kant writes that "all representations, whether they have for their objects outer things or not, belong, in themselves, as determinations of the mind, to our inner state" (1965, 77). Knowledge becomes possible through a form of spontaneity, by which the understanding produces representations. Spontaneity is thus "the ground of a threefold synthesis which must necessarily be found in all knowledge; namely, the *apprehension* of representations as modifications of the mind in intuition, their *reproduction* in imagination, and their *recognition* in a concept" (131).

6. On the "representation of a necessary connection of perceptions," see Kant 1965, 208–38.

7. Compare the postcard and its function (which is, primarily, to organize narrative action around questions of interpreting the significance of objects) to Stephen's telegram to Mulligan—"The sentimentalist is he who would enjoy without incurring the immense debtorship for a thing done" (*U* 199)—and the role it plays in helping to structure "Scylla and Charybdis" around issues of artistic aspiration and literary debt.

8. As I understand it, following Friedrich Schiller, this play is essentially negative dialectical, that is, it allows for the negative to play a role other than pure negation, to adopt the form of a "positivity." See Schiller 1967, 97–99.

9. According to Don Gifford and Robert Seidman, James II, in 1689, "debased the Irish currency by coining money out of inferior metals" (1989, 34).

10. The "impossible-real Thing" is a concept from Jacques Lacan, and has been developed extensively by Slavoj Žižek, who reminds us that Lacan "defines art itself with regard to the Thing: in his *Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he claims that art as such is always organized around the central Void of the impossible-real Thing—a statement which, perhaps, should be read as a variation on Rilke's old thesis that 'Beauty is the last veil that covers the Horrible'" (Žižek 1999, 221). Nietzsche's name for this "horrible" reality is *necessity*.

11. Bloom's pragmatic relation to objects (broadly, material culture) stands behind many readings of Joyce's relation to the object world, beginning with Harry Levin's argument that Joyce's interest in the object world was part of a larger interest in "the routines of everyday life" ([1941] 1960, 31). "No naturalist," Levin argues, "has ventured a more exhaustive and unsparing depiction of the immediacies of daily life" (18). Levin's distinction was updated almost forty years later by Charles Peake (1977). For both, Bloom is *l'homme moyen sensuel*, ever attendant to the objects in his way, over against Stephen's



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idealist artist. Seamus Deane follows this general line (1987, 76, 87, 89).

12. Most critics see Bloom as the more astute observer of objects; see, for example, Boscaglia 2014, 92–107. The reliance on the metaphor of *voice* and the intentions of *saying* are common to these studies; see Plock 2012. Too often the status of the thing/object is not clearly given (or even speculated on), other than to say (or imply) that it desires to speak for itself. Elizabeth Inglesby pushes against this approach when she speaks of objects “completing a circle of regard that suggests mutuality, rather than difference, among the gazing objects” (2014, 316).

13. Hence the degree to which Bloom’s life creates in us a kind of biographical fever; see, for example, Raleigh 1977 and Crispi 2015.

14. Paul K. Saint-Amour refers to this distinction in his discussion of the soap Bloom buys for Molly and his talismanic potato, though admittedly he uses the terms *thing* and *object* synonymously. I agree with him that “*Ulysses*, for all its many objects, contains very few things” (2014, 210).

15. The aesthetic object (in the present context, the literary text) constructs a world. “In signifying,” Dufrenne writes, “the aesthetic object does not exist to serve the world. It is, rather, the source of a world which is its own” (1966, 167); on the “expressed world” and the “represented world” and how they integrate to form the world of the work, see 166–98.

16. This kind of post-Heideggerian thought was pioneered by Graham Harman (2002). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s influence is notable in a more vitalist strand of this resurgent interest in objects; see Bennett 2010. Relevant in this regard are essays by Bogost and Bennett in Grusin 2015. Speculative realism takes this position to a certain limit in its assertion of a new transcendental empiricism; see Markus 2015.

17. Merleau-Ponty (1968, 130–55) made much the same point. I draw a distinction between the passage of the object into thingness, which the subject *notices*, and delay, which is what the object *causes*.

18. The phrase “marmorean stillness” comes from Yeats’s essay on artistic personality, “Poetry and Tradition” (1907). See Yeats 2007, 186.

19. Stephen uses the word “thing” in all three steps, but in the first two, he is clearly referring to what I am designating here as the “object.”

20. See Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist” in which he provocatively inverts Matthew Arnold’s famous claim that the critic sees the object *as it really is*. For Wilde, the “primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is *not*” (1905, 144).

21. Nicholas Brown believes that *Ulysses* “subsumes the epiphanic



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method"—and the aesthetic theory it exemplifies—"within a grander strategy" (2005, 41).

22. See Gifford and Seidman 1989, 12–13.

23. For Lacan, the *point de capiton* (upholstery pin or anchor-point) calls a halt to signification; it denotes a point of stabilized tension, a point at which, as Lacan says, "signified and signifier are knotted together" (quoted in Evans 1996, 151). Cf. Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill" (1999, 463).

24. On aura in this temporal sense, see Benjamin 1999, 59–67. According to Graeme Gilloch's reading of Benjamin's theory of aura, "Afterlife is the period in which the pure but deceptive surfaces of the object are eroded, in which hidden meanings are unfolded and truth is ultimately disclosed" (2002, 4).

25. Tim Conley recognizes this idea of "error" and explores the extent to which a critical or negative engagement with "'correct' characterizations makes room for the "polymorphous and transgressive" itinerary of both "artistic creation and error" (2003, 13).

26. Benjamin's "angel of history" is a figure for how the historical materialist looks at the past: "A storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm" (1996, 392). Benjamin's "shattered" vision of history is a form of redemptive time; a heterodox modernist form of *tikkun olam* (Hebrew: תיקון עולם or תיקון עולמות, repairing or healing the world), the Jewish belief that finds human agency in divine creation.

27.

—That is God.

Hooray! Ay! Whrrwheel!

—What? Mr Deasy asked.

—A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders. (U 34)

28. Inglesby describes how bracelets and ferrules structure "Nestor" and other parts of *Ulysses* along lines similar to my discussion of anchor points (2014, 301–7, 312–14); however, her emphasis on the "speech of unheard things" (299) makes what I'm calling lyricism a function of things, rather than of apprehension.

29. On Stephen's Aristotelian references and "the form of sensibles," see Gifford and Seidman 1989, 32.

30. Stephen's friend Cranly, after a long pause in an intimate, almost confessional, discussion of what is owed to one's mother, says, "Whatever else is



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unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world a mother's love is not. Your mother brings you into the world, carries you first in her body. What do we know about what she feels? But whatever she feels, it, at least, must be real. It must be" (P 213).

31. See Spoo 1994, 89–104.

32. Artistic truth of the sort Stephen seeks is, in Theodor Adorno's terms, a "constellation of subject and object in which both penetrate each other" (1973, 126).

33. Jews have been living in Ireland since at least the eleventh century; see Gifford and Seidman (1989, 40). Deasy's boneheaded error is nothing like the misrecognition that Stephen engineers in artistic apprehension.

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# The Modernist Inkblot

*Emily James*

Once the disease of reading has laid hold upon the system it weakens it so that it falls an easy prey to that other scourge which dwells in the inkpot and festers in the quill. The wretch takes to writing.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Writing with pen and ink favors a steady hand and steadfast resolve. In a utopian scene of writing, the ink flows from pen to paper in a metered economy: precisely fluid enough for dramatic swoops and elegant ligatures but not so much that the writer's hand bears tell-tale smudges or smears. But ink is rarely so obliging. Predictably unpredictable, its ebb and flow are accompanied by such ephemeral byproducts as the inkblot and blotting paper. Together, they constitute a messy and protean economy that is instrumental to modernism's scenes of writing.

The word "blot" has accrued an array of connotations, many of which bespeak its curious but vexing relationship to the creative process. Rich with suggestive ties to the body, a blot can signify a mark, blemish, or disfigurement. A blot might besmirch its maker: to blot is to soil something, or cover paper with worthless writing. And because the verb can mean "to absorb" but also "to stain," it can be understood as a contronym or enantiodrome: a word that denotes both a thing and its opposite. Even in its lexical guise, the blot is beset by doubleness.

Curiouser still, inkblots have sustained associations with creativity and imagination. When the inkblot was adopted by psychoanalysts at the turn of the twentieth century, it came to represent the creative unconscious in ways that would persist in literary modernism. Within the inkblot's amorphous contours, creativity forges an uneasy rapport with criminality.



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A blotter not only suggests the police blotter, or crime report, but also a scribbler, or sorry writer. And if ink is the sorry writer's lifeblood, then blotting paper is the *sine qua non* of authorial practice. Inky mistakes and blotting paper are closely entangled: one strays, and the other corrals; one is wayward and unruly, and the other its disapproving headmaster.

Though borne of utility, the blotting paper creates an ephemeral or paratextual trace of the manuscript. A writer's blotter would contain an inky imprint, or a shadow image, of the writer's process—a treasure trove for the archivist. At stake here are notions of material enclosure; namely, the act of writing takes place under cover in order to evade the public gaze. Such covert measures became critical to women writers for whom composition was suspect. This constellation of meanings coheres in modernist scenes of writing, from the blot's corporeal implications to the suggestion that authorship is a clandestine, even criminal, enterprise.

Modernists were not the first to notice the cryptographic possibilities of blotting paper. This history begins in the late nineteenth century, when the practice of mirror-writing was associated with mediumship and the occult. As Helen Sword explains, mediumship “has always been closely allied with authorship” (2002, 8).<sup>1</sup> And since pens could be haunted, handwriting became a trace or imprint of an otherworldly presence. For instance, handwriting plays a pivotal role in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which a specialist notices that Jekyll and Hyde's handwriting styles are “identical” save for the important detail that they are “differently sloped” (2003, 28). Incidentally, when Hyde later evades the police, he is “simply blotted out” of the narrative, as if little more than an erratic inkblot. Central to Hyde's menace, writes Patrick Brantlinger, is his literacy: “Hyde lurks in a shadowy borderland between a criminal literature of the slums—penny numbers, shilling shockers—and the moral allegory” proposed by Stevenson's wife Fanny (1998, 179). James Joyce, too, would engage mirror-writing's criminality in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Some see Shem the Penman as Joyce's authorial doppelgänger, but, like Jekyll, Shem has a double of his own: “Maistre Sheames de la Plume,” writer of “some most dreadful stuff in a murderous mirrorhand” (Joyce 2012, 177). As we will later see, it is unclear whether these writings are “dreadful” in the sense of quality or in terms of genre: the literal sense that they inspire dread, as a crime novel like Stevenson's might.

Crime fiction made good use of blotting paper. A single blotter could be read as a palimpsest, with pages of script imprinted in mirror image. Sherlock Holmes takes advantage of the phenomenon when he solves



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a crime by reading the blotter's imprint in Arthur Conan Doyle's 1904 story "The Adventures of the Missing Three-Quarter." Embedded in the original publication in *The Strand* is an image of the tell-tale handwriting, rendered in mirror image by the blotting paper (a plot device, by the way, that Joyce would later rehearse with fascination). Like a photographic negative, the mirrored script functions like a cipher or, in the story's terms, a "hieroglyphic" (Doyle 1953, 731–32). And much like the blot's contronymic legacy—wherein a single word might mean one thing and its opposite—the blotting paper's script suggests both encryption and key, or hieroglyphic and Rosetta Stone. The script captured on the blotting paper (typically a disposable graphic trace) can be understood as a clue, or a narrative device crucial to the growing genre of detective fiction. From Jekyll to Sherlock to Shem, we see a confluence of criminal narratives, the doppelgänger, and writing's ephemeral traces. Lurking in the shadows of this unlikely cluster is the inkblot.

The inkblot came into its own with the late-nineteenth-century practice of kleksography, in which an ink-spattered page was folded to create an image of bilateral symmetry. Early on, these quasi-calculated inkblots were catalysts for the imagination and triggers for free association. A European parlor game in the nineteenth century, Klexographie, or "Blotto," involved a set of inkblots from which participants generated words and phrases. German poet Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) would annotate his inkblots with imaginative poems (see figure 1). His work emerged nearly in synchrony with the faux-Darwinian classifications and taxonomies



Figure 1. Justinus Kerner (1890). *Kleksographien*.



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imagined by nonsense poets Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. In keeping with this trend for fanciful creatures, Kerner's 1857 *Kleksographien* suggestively blurs the human and otherworldly. Kerner, who described his inky creations as "chance inkblots," seems to have stressed their arcane provenance, even suggesting that "the forms assumed by the blots were sometimes of supernatural origin—'figures from Hades'" (Pichot 1984, 594–95).

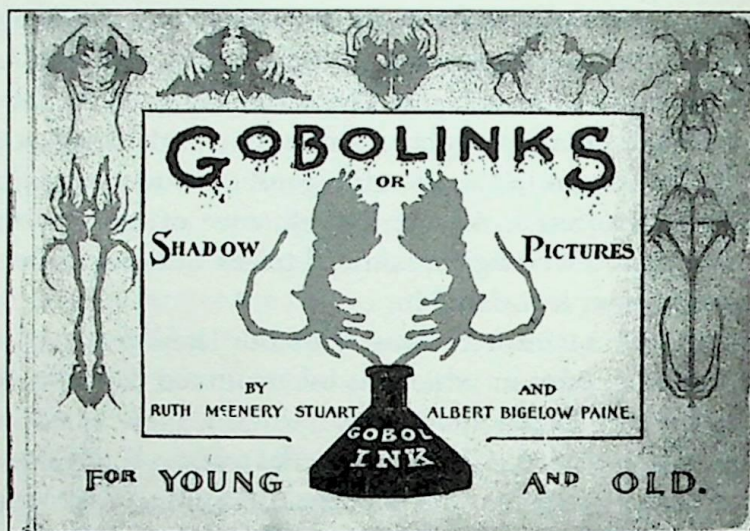


Figure 2. Stuart and Paine. *Gobolinks* (1896). Front cover.

The klecksograph's folding resembles the work of blotting paper; a single image encompasses both the original and its mirrored opposite, as if introducing the pen's untidy scrawl to its paratextual voyeur. The inkblot's mirror-image design—its premeditated duplicity—strikingly resembles the two hemispheres of the brain and, at the same time, implicates both halves of the human spirit.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, it embodies both Jekyll and Hyde in a single image or Joyce's "murderous mirrorhand." Especially popular at the end of the century was *Gobolinks, or Shadow Pictures for Young and Old* (1896) by Ruth McEnery Stuart and Albert Bigelow Paine. The title's playful portmanteau unites "ink" with "goblin," presumably a devilish spirit that haunts the inkbottle. (And, as we will later see, modernism was familiar with haunted inkbottles, with Joyce's Shem the Penman residing in a Haunted Ink bottle of his own.)<sup>3</sup> From the Butterfly Man to the Long-Tailed Bear, the Gobolinks demonstrate how the blot's inky genesis gives way to novel appendages, from whiskers and wings to tails.

This whimsical history culminates with klecksography's lone celebrity, one who played with inkblots throughout childhood and adulthood.



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Hermann Rorschach was born in 1884 and nicknamed “Klex” (or inkblot) in school (Wood et al. 2003, 24). Following his medical training, he worked as a resident at a psychiatric asylum in Münsterlingen, Switzerland from 1909 to 1913. This would prove an exciting juncture, one rich with watershed research by Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud, and others. In 1911, Rorschach introduced inkblots to his research “to investigate whether gifted children gave more imaginative interpretations than did less gifted children” (Richardson 2011, 136). In June 1921, Rorschach published *Psychodiagnostik*, and thus emerged the Rorschach inkblot test.<sup>4</sup>

Rorschach died in 1922, at the moment of modernism’s zenith, and only nine months after the publication of his monograph. His supervisor Eugen Bleuler commemorated Rorschach as “the hope of an entire generation of Swiss Psychiatry” (Wood et al. 2003, 28). By World War II, the test had become a prominent psychodiagnostic measure: “Training manuals were rushed into print and many people were trained in Rorschach procedure” (Aronow, Reznikoff, and Moreland 1994, 5). Early on, Rorschach’s inkblots were understood as “a visual variation on Freud’s verbal technique” of prompting free association (Geary 2011, 63).<sup>5</sup> Today, the Rorschach inkblot test has weathered nearly a century of praise and critical outrage for what some have described as a “pseudoscientific modern variant on tea leaf reading and Tarot cards” (Wood et al. 2003, 1).

From Kerner’s whimsy to Rorschach’s research, the inkblot’s striking forms flirt with the erratic, asking subjects to ascribe randomness with narrative. Such phenomena fall under the aegis of pareidolia, the impulse to extract meaning from the seemingly random—from clustering illusions to mondegreens and constellations. Marrying the Greek roots *para-* (beside,



Figure 3. Stuart and Paine. *Gobolinks* (1896). Back cover.



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alongside—but, in this case, faulty or wrong) and *eidōlon* (image, form, shape, representation), the term's etymology itself suggests a haunted mirror image. In fact, the term *eidōlon* is historically intermingled with spectral narratives. Pareidolic tendencies are sometimes hierophantic, such as the Man in the Moon or urban legends about a prophet likeness arising from a toaster.<sup>6</sup> If it seems that our yearnings for meaning-making favor the lunar and stellar, this is perhaps because the world above is as foreign as it is familiar. And because we crave the comforts of faces and figures, inkblots seem to satisfy, or at least tempt, these cravings. Rorschach's images tend to elicit human or animal associations, so reliably that Card I is fondly known as the "sinister-looking moth," Card II is the "sex card," and Card IV the "father card" (Aronow, Reznikoff, and Moreland 1994, 34–38). Perhaps inkblots are seductive to viewers because their randomness is ambiguous, even suspect; are they random, really? The inkblot's bilateral symmetry, remember, is suggestively organic, and it might be tempting to project upon it the brain's hemispheres or the butterfly's spots. But that wavering is precisely the draw of the pareidolic. Unmoored from the rules of representation, the viewer assumes the authority of assigning meaning to the meaningless.



Figure 4. Rorschach. *Psychodiagnostics* (1951).

Alone, an inkblot is unfinished. It wants labels, interpretations, and stories, and in flirting between representation and abstraction it is suggestively compatible with the modernist moment. We see pareidolic impulses, for instance, in the haunting anthem of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (2001, 30). In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), a skywriting plane inspires assorted Londoners to look upward, each ascribing lexical meaning to what at first seems like a random assortment of letters. For Septimus Smith, the



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pareidolic urge stirs his wartime traumas—"So," he muses, "they are signalling to me"—but then prompts a poignant meditation on beauty: "Tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky" (Woolf 1981, 21–22).

We could as easily attribute the inkblot to modernism's ekphrastic impulse, one sometimes traced back to Walter Pater's well-loved description of *Mona Lisa* (1873) and forward to W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1939) and "The Shield of Achilles" (1952).<sup>7</sup> By definition, though, ekphrasis presupposes representation, whereas the inkblot at least pretends at abstraction.<sup>8</sup> As if baiting spectators to free-associate, Andy Warhol's 1984 series "Rorschach" features inkblot prints nearly fourteen feet in height, a project cited by Rosalind Krauss as evidence of the artist's renewed commitment to abstraction (2012, 27–33). More recently, Rorschach's work has resurfaced as a counter-creative motif. Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record* (2000) rehearses in alphabetical order fifty years of Rorschach responses in what Brian Reed has described as "a dystopian vision in which interior lives are reducible to strings of alphanumeric data" (2013, 69).<sup>9</sup>

My aim, however, is not to rehearse a catalogue of modernist pareidolia but to acknowledge that pareidolic impulses may inform the writings of key modernists when they engage inkblots as sites of suspect creativity. Modernist inkblots not only plumb the relationship between randomness and narrative but also interrogate creativity for its psychological demons. An inkblot, remember, comprises both the original and its copy. The Rorschach inkblot was wildly popular, I believe, because it excavated suspicions about writing's duplicity: not only its haunted origins but also a lingering criminal depth evident in writing's material manifestations. First tracing a lineage from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf, I show that what began as convention or material necessity for women writers evolved into a critical adaptation, one that supports and engenders creativity. Joyce, too, explores inky mistakes—blots as well as their ephemeral remedies—as covert sites of women's authorship and graphic imagination. What's more, in remaining loyal to old-fashioned accoutrements like pen, ink, and paper, Woolf and Joyce demonstrate an attachment to composition's pre-modern materiality—an attachment sharply at odds with modernism's well-documented technophilia.<sup>10</sup> What resurfaces in such scenes of writing is a scrawling, scribbling, doodling praxis too often eclipsed by the eventualities of type and reproduction. The material exigencies of handwriting, I argue, come to support and even protect modernist creativity.



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## Beneath the blotting paper

In exploring the material complexities of women's authorship, it is tempting to understand the inkblot's fluidity in terms of sentiment. One such example is the first page of Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), and our introduction to Betty Flanders:

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. . . . The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread. (1950, 7)

The passage suggestively layers tears with ink, the two fluids impeding the writer's eyesight and composition.<sup>11</sup> We could conclude that the inkblot is little more than affective prop—an objective correlative, maybe, for what George Eliot might have termed “silly novels by lady novelists” (1883, 178).<sup>12</sup> But surely Woolf is up to something more interesting. First, the inkblot dissolves the full stop, akin to dismantling syntax into a stream of language. Second, the inkblot inspires such lively verbs as “quiver,” “wobble,” and “bend,” melting the quotidian scene into a kind of surrealist tableau. Solid objects, from lighthouse to mast, begin to behave *like* ink, or as if awash in an inky deluge. Once Betty blots away her tears, the passage's formal register returns to lexical realism with plain predicate adjectives: “was straight,” “were regular,” “was upright.” Her fleeting sentiment betrays a Woolfian sleight of hand: Betty's “stuck pen” gives us pause enough to see the scene through her eyes as well as those of its modernist maker.

As if plumbing the blot's potent associations with sentimentality, Woolf addresses writing's materiality in plainly gendered terms in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She first recalls that William Shakespeare famously “never blotted a line,” suggesting that his ink was perfectly apportioned for the task at hand (Woolf 1957, 53). Readers might hesitate to take such a comment literally, but Woolf does exactly that a few pages later when she turns to the material conditions faced by Jane Austen. Woolf first imagines the challenges of writing in “the common sitting room”: the constant interruptions, distractions, and obstacles faced by the woman writer. According to a nephew's memoir, Austen had to be “careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party.” She “was glad that a hinge creaked,



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so that she might hide her manuscript before any one came in" because, as Woolf speculates, "there was something discreditable in writing *Pride and Prejudice*." The result is an ephemeral form of secrecy: as Woolf explains, Austen "hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper" (70–71). So imagined, the blotting paper serves as a veil or mantle enshrouding the writer's work in secrecy.

Though Woolf professes surprise at such efforts to cocoon the act of writing, we can see similar patterns in her own autobiographical writings. In "A Sketch of the Past" (1939), she recalls her adolescent bedroom and the secondhand writing table she inherited from her half sister Stella, a table "stained green and decorated by her with a pattern of brown leaves" (Woolf 1985, 122). In looking closely at this writing space, we see that, much like Austen's, it is characterized by secrecy: "On it stood open my Greek lexicon; some Greek play or other; many little bottles of ink, pens innumerable; and probably hidden under blotting paper, sheets of foolscap covered with private writing in a hand so small and twisted as to be a family joke." In recalling this formative space, Woolf dwells on its material conditions. Beneath the public display of Greek drama, her "private writing" is characterized by sedimentary layers ("hidden under") and convolutions. Even her "small and twisted" handwriting resembles a cipher. Blotting paper, as in Austen's example, serves as an enclosure around the scene of writing. For this young writer first imagining a room of her own, the blotting paper effectively partitions her from the wider world.

Blotting paper assumes an instrumental role in Woolf's late fiction, particularly in *The Years* (1937). I focus here on Eleanor Pargiter's composition process, one that unfolds across decades. From the late Victorian era to "The Present Moment," Eleanor's world changes dramatically, but the material conditions of her writing remain constant. When we first encounter her writing, the year is 1891: "Eleanor was sitting at her writing-table with her pen in her hand. . . . She drew on her blotting paper; a dot with strokes raying out round it. Then she looked up. They were burning weeds in the back garden; there was a drift of smoke; a sharp acrid smell; and leaves were falling. A barrel-organ was playing up the street" (Woolf 1965, 91). What might have begun as an inkblot and then a simple doodle—"a dot with strokes raying out round it"—unfolds into a series of sensory memories: smells, sights, and sounds. In 1910, nearly two decades later, the scene all but repeats itself: "Eleanor was blackening the strokes on her blotting-paper. I've heard all this, I've done all this so often, she was thinking. She glanced round the table. . . . I know what he's going to say, I know what she's going to say,



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she thought, digging a little hole in the blotting-paper. . . . Why must we do it? Eleanor thought, drawing a spoke from the hole in the middle" (175). The scene is plainly modern, from Eleanor's distractible and almost Prufrockian ennui to the modern implications of her sketch. What were solar "rays" in 1891 have become "strokes" and then "spokes" in 1910. The dot's radiating structure has evolved into something mechanical: the spokes of a bicycle wheel, perhaps, or an engine's strokes.<sup>13</sup> What seemed aimless before has gradually become more insistent. A destructive urgency or violence is evident here, as she digs into the paper with determined force.<sup>14</sup> And when her sketching becomes "digging," the paper acquires a third dimension, as if her creative medium has transformed from the writer's ink to the sculptor's clay.

When the narrative advances to the present day, we again find Eleanor thinking about her writing table and experimenting with the blot: "Millions of things came back to her. Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life? . . . Perhaps there's 'I' at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a centre; and again she saw herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting-paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated. Out and out they went; thing followed thing, scene obliterated scene" (366–67). In a meditation again distinctly modern, she conceives of memory in terms of lively atomic imagery. The question she poses to herself—"How did they compose what people called a life?"—pivots on a telling ambiguity: the word "compose" could simply mean "make," but because Eleanor sits at a writing table, we ought to also consider her question in terms of creative process.

I believe that Eleanor answers her own question in the passage's final sentence: "Out and out they went; thing followed thing, scene obliterated scene." In this metanarrative, we can glean important clues about modernist creativity. The first of three narrative models, "out and out they went," is plainly spatial and suggests a kind of spidery, radiating model suggestive of social metaphor. This model resembles the "navelcord" that stretches across Joyce's Dublin in *Ulysses* (1993, 3.36) or, in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the "thin thread" that connects Richard to Clarissa until, "as a single spider's thread is blotted with rain-drops, and, burdened, sags down," it breaks (1981, 112). Given Eleanor's earlier fascination with solar rays and radiating spokes, this branching model is familiar to readers. In the second model, "thing followed thing" is a temporal or sequential stringing-together of items, a narrative conventional in its linearity. Most interesting of all is "scene obliterated scene"—a third model that, particularly in light of the historical moment, 1937, eerily



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augurs World War II. The term “obliterate,” a Latinate conjoining of “ob-” (against) and “littera” (letter, script), means “to erase, delete, efface” and also “to blot out (anything written, drawn, imprinted, etc.)” (OED 2015, emphasis mine). As Woolf understands it, to obliterate is conceptually similar to blot in the sense that it encompasses its own opposite, so that in Eleanor’s imagination, obliteration is writing that unwrites. Her inky mistake has precipitated not an aimless sketch but a narrative model rife with pessimism. Returning to her radiant “knot” or “centre,” moreover, we can understand obliteration as a literary device, and the blot a creative mechanism important to the woman writer.

While *Jacob’s Room* or *The Years* may offer us passing glimpses of creative process, a fuller representation appears in *Orlando* (1928), where Orlando drafts and revises “The Oak Tree” across centuries, allowing Woolf to dramatize the poem’s composition in protracted detail. The poem is materially complex in part because of the privacies engineered by its writer:

Then Orlando felt in the bosom of her shirt as if for some locket or relic of lost affection, and drew out no such thing, but a roll of paper, sea-stained, blood-stained, travel-stained—the manuscript of her poem, “The Oak Tree.” She had carried this about with her for so many years now, and in such hazardous circumstances, that many of the pages were stained, some were torn, while the straits she had been in for writing paper when with the gipsies, had forced her to overscore the margins and cross the lines till the manuscript looked like a piece of darning. (Woolf 2006, 172–73)

“The Oak Tree” is a “roll of paper,” not yet printed and reproduced, and the manuscript unfurls like a scroll, its unraveling a prerequisite to reading or writing. In rolling it up, in other words, the writer encloses the composition. Orlando participates in the tradition of “crossing letters,” an epistolary technique important to women writers and sometimes used for economy or encryption.<sup>15</sup> The poem, we learn, did not emerge from a linear stitching together of word upon word but has instead thickened over time, accruing layers as if a palimpsest of ink, blood, tears, even seawater. So elaborate is this weaving together that the poem begins to resemble “darning,” in a sense conflating text and textile, vividly illustrating what Woolf would elsewhere term “frock consciousness,” the pages nearly stitched into “the bosom of her shirt.”<sup>16</sup> It seems fitting, then, that Orlando keeps close to her body not a symbol of romance (a “locket



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or relic of lost affection”) but a draft, and one that betrays the material conditions of her creative process.

Especially curious is the role of the inkblot in Orlando’s writing, a mistake that would seem to arrest but actually helps enable her creative process:

Orlando, who had just dipped her pen in the ink, and was about to indite some reflection upon the eternity of all things, was much annoyed to be impeded by a blot, which spread and meandered round her pen. It was some infirmity of the quill, she supposed; it was split or dirty. She dipped it again. The blot increased. She tried to go on with what she was saying; no words came. Next she tried to decorate the blot with wings and whiskers, till it became a round-headed monster, something between a bat and a wombat. . . . To her astonishment and alarm, the pen began to curve and caracole with the smoothest possible fluency.<sup>17</sup> (173–74)

The blot, first described in terms of impediment or infirmity—a body broken, perhaps, or maladapted—prompts the pen to “caracole,” suggesting the urgency and dynamism of a rollicking horse.<sup>18</sup> The inkblot, and the creature spun from it, are reminiscent of the klecksographs that transfixed Kerner, just as its inky “wings and whiskers” recall the mythical Gobolinks created by Stuart and Paine. The ominous “round-headed monster” possesses the pen such that it takes on a life of its own. As the pen assumes physical and even grammatical agency, Orlando’s creative process seems governed by some external force; were she W. B. Yeats or Gertrude Stein, we might call this automatic writing.

This scene occurs in the Victorian era, but, as her automatic writing suggests, Orlando’s sensations are distinctly modern.<sup>19</sup> As her pen becomes haunted, she feels “as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing scales,” and her “arms sang and twanged as the telegraph wires would be singing and twanging in twenty years or so” (175). The next morning, her pen remains haunted: “The pen made one large lachrymose blot after another, or it ambled off, more alarmingly still into mellifluous fluencies” (177). As in the opening of *Jacob’s Room*, the intermingling of tears and ink in a “lachrymose blot” could suggest the writer’s sentimental leanings, but, importantly, the blot here does not arrest the writer’s progress. On the contrary, the pen “amble[s] off,” as if assuming new mobility in the wake of its inky play.



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Woolf's pens would again be haunted by otherworldly spirits. In her 1931 essay "Professions for Women," she describes her hand-to-hand combat with the Angel in the House, the icon of Victorian femininity whose decorum and propriety threaten the woman writer's work. The Angel's principal crime, it would seem, is ink-haunting: "She made as if to guide my pen" (1979, 60). Reacting with violence, Woolf turns upon the Angel, killing her, and, forever after, Woolf writes, "whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard." Just as the Angel's weapon of choice is the pen, Woolf retaliates with the inkpot, a weapon certain to stain the Angel's radiant dress. In a sense, the Angel becomes the blank page upon which the writer hurls her ink—an act of violence that would turn the Angel into a demon, appropriately so, given the inkblot's entanglement with a lively genealogy of demons. Klecksography, after all, nearly coincided with Coventry Patmore's 1854 "The Angel in the House," the poem responsible for the counter-creative force that haunts Woolf. And as *Orlando* has taught us, if the aspiring writer is to benefit from an unearthly benefactor, it would not be an Angel at all but a demon emerging from the primordial soup of the inkblot.

## Leopold Bloom, scribbler

From the material intimacies of women's authorship, we turn to Joyce, whose 1922 *Ulysses* is similarly preoccupied—this time, though, through the eyes of compositional voyeur and trespasser Leopold Bloom. Because Bloom wants to write popular fiction and imagines himself a neophyte in this decidedly feminine cult of writing, he studies the compositional practices of his wife Molly, daughter Milly, and correspondent Martha Clifford. Along the way, he adopts crucial strategies and emulates the material complexity of their compositions, including the strategic use of material enclosure (often blotting paper) for authorial privacy. Recalling Orlando's writing history for a moment, the development of "The Oak Tree" could be understood to reach its apotheosis once Orlando writes as a woman, crossing her letters for privacy, but then also reaping the creative freedoms such privacy affords. Bloom similarly adopts certain strategies of women writers in order to exercise creative freedoms typically beyond his purview. Here, we widen our scope from ink's particularities—blot and blotting paper—to the material practices essential to authorship, especially those important to the popular genres that populate *Ulysses*.



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The reading landscape of *Ulysses* is saturated with popular fiction, and Bloom's authorial ambitions are relatedly middlebrow.<sup>20</sup> Detective fiction, for instance, is a mainstay of his musings. Earlier, we learned of blotting paper's instrumental role in Doyle's story "The Adventures of the Missing Three-Quarter" (1904), where Holmes neatly solves a crime by reading the blotter's mirrored "hieroglyphics" for clues. In "Sirens," Bloom imagines just such a scenario. Penning a flirtatious letter to typist Martha Clifford, he quickly blots the address to hide his infidelity from an onlooker. In so doing, an idea occurs to him: "Blot over the other so he can't read. There. Right. Idea prize titbit. Something detective read off blotting pad" (Joyce 1993, 11.901–92).<sup>21</sup> Bloom's infidelity triggers these guilty associations with crime and detection, but perhaps more suggestive is the blotting paper that prompts him to think creatively about narrative devices. In this case, writing a letter to typist Clifford—a missive enmeshed in his own sensational fantasy—is connected to a larger fantasy, one in which he is a writer of popular fiction. In his courtship, then, Bloom becomes both mysterious lover and authorial puppet-master.

By this point in the novel, readers are wise to Bloom's half-hearted ambition to write popular stories. His aims are plainly inspired by the reading materials he encounters at home and around Dublin, from his own fascination with Raoul's steamy adventures in *The Sweets of Sin* to Molly's blithe regard for the novels of Paul de Kock.<sup>22</sup> Even the imagined tryst between Bloom and Gerty MacDowell could be understood as two readers immersed in the shared lexicon of popular fiction. When he visits the latrine in "Calypso," reading and then blotting himself with an ill-fated edition of *Titbits*, we first learn about his short-lived writing career:

Our prize titbit: *Matcham's Masterstroke*. Written by Mr Philip Beaufoy, Playgoers' Club, London. Payment at the rate of one guinea a column has been made to the writer. Three and a half. Three pounds three. Three pounds, thirteen and six. . . . It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat. Print anything now. Silly season. . . . He envied kindly Mr Beaufoy who had written it and received payment of three pounds, thirteen and six. Might manage a sketch. By Mr and Mrs L. M. Bloom. Invent a story for some proverb. Which? Time I used to try jotting down on my cuff what she said dressing. Dislike dressing together.<sup>23</sup> (1993, 4.502–20)



In imagining his future as a writer, Bloom is at first purely pragmatic. Unmoved by Beaufoy's prose, he instead mulls over the particulars of income and the allure of a "fashionable London address" (Gifford and Seidman 1998, 81). Importantly, Bloom understands the writing life in terms of a marital collaboration. The partnership he imagines is hardly egalitarian, though: it positions Molly as creative source and Bloom as copyist. In a sense, he casts himself as apprentice to the craft of women's authorship, furtively "jotting down" the fruits of her creative practice. But in transcribing her words in her bedroom while she is in a state of undress, he violates one of the few privacies available to women authors.

Molly's words are critical to Bloom's developing creative process in several key ways. Bloom aspires to write the sort of popular fiction he finds in his home, which means that his authorial aims are sharply gendered. Like generations of women writers before him, he exercises this ambition under cover. Imagining her husband's infidelities, Molly Bloom recalls: "Yes because the day before yesterday he was scribbling something a letter when I came into the front room to show him Dignams death in the paper as if something told me and he covered it up with the blottingpaper pretending to be thinking about business so very probably that was it" (Joyce 1993, 18.46–51). What Molly describes here is eerily similar to Woolf's description of women writers like Austen—working in the parlor, or "the front room," and covering their work with blotting paper to disguise their efforts at composition. What's more, Molly describes Bloom's work as "scribbling," a word loaded with pejorative allusions to women's authorship. Bloom might well be hiding evidence of his infidelities, but his stealth is also connected to his private practice of "scribbling" stories for *Titbits*.

Bloom observes and participates in several models of women's authorship, one of them epistolary. In surveying his zig-zagging wanderings through Dublin on June 16, 1904, we can see how his correspondence requires him to assume a number of roles: cuckold, father, advertiser, even would-be lover. Early in the day, as he wakes at 7 Eccles St. and retrieves the morning mail, he spots a note from Blazes Boylan to Molly as well as a letter from his "fond daughter Milly."<sup>24</sup> The letters are far from uniform in their material bearing. Boylan's "bold hand" suggests that the letter was dashed off in the magisterial style we come to expect from him. What's more, his heavy hand implicates the feminized "scribbling" that thwarts Bloom's authorship. Importantly, Bloom does not study Boylan's letter so much as his wife's response to it. Even as he watches for signs of his imminent cuckoldry, he is also keen to observe and emulate Molly's



authorial strategies. For instance, he notices that Molly opens, reads, and then tucks the letter under her pillow. Bloom catches her in this act of material enclosure, as if spotting the woman writer's recourse to blotting paper. In fact, Bloom has begun to adopt these strategies himself.

Bloom's epistolary romance with Clifford is a tutorial in the ephemeral trappings of women's composition. Readers are familiar with Bloom's attraction to such a type. By way of his alter ego Henry Flower, he has enlisted not just any lady typist, but a smart one: "Wanted, smart lady typist to aid gentleman in literary work" (8.326-27). Indeed, Flower's advertisement specifies "literary work," not secretarial transcription, as if the typist's requisite smartness implies that she will be involved not only in reproduction but also composition. Crucially, Bloom requires not transcription but tutelage—in how to write a popular story but also, perhaps, how to *be* a popular story. After all, the typewriter girl was by this point a stock character in popular fiction and erotica.

Bloom studies Clifford's letter with an eye for its material complexity. Unsurprisingly, she has typed her letter, and Bloom notes that the address to "Henry Flower Esq" is typed on the envelope (5.61). Even in its packaging, the letter advertises Clifford's vocation—a collapse of the professional and personal that intrigues Bloom. What's more, Clifford is herself prone to wordplay. In writing to Flower, she has compressed exactly that within the missive: "A flower. I think it's a. A yellow flower with flattened petals" (5.239). The odd textual feature plays on the organic and ephemeral, just as "leaves" might signify both pages and foliage. And if we can imagine Clifford flattening the flower's three dimensions into two, we could read Bloom's leveling of character in similar terms. In enlisting Clifford in his authorial fantasy, he compresses her into a flat textual feature, or reduces a human being into a stock type of popular fiction.

So involved is the letter's materiality that it resembles a woman's dress: "Fingering still the letter in his pocket he drew the pin out of it. Common pin, eh? He threw it in the road. Out of her clothes somewhere: pinned together. Queer the number of pins they always have. No roses without thorns" (5.275-78). Hand in pocket, Bloom unpins the letter by touch, as if undressing in the dark. (The pin recalls an earlier scene from "Calypso" in which Molly reads with her pin, tracing the text line by line in search of metempsychosis. She reads by touch, in other words, just as Bloom becomes acquainted with Clifford's material assemblage in the privacy of his pocket.) Given this intimacy, it is surprising how quickly and resolutely Bloom discards the letter's pin, considering that he had earlier surveyed Molly's lingerie with meticulous care, noting



her underclothes strewn across the bedroom floor. And readers know by this point that Bloom handles material objects with a kind of kinaesthetic reverence—he thinks often of the lemon soap in his pocket, for instance, or his parched potato. So why discard the pin? For Bloom, women's literacy is predicated on material assemblage, and he observes these structures carefully but ultimately undoes them—as if unpinning a specimen from its taxonomic shackles in order to study, and perhaps mimic, its adaptive mechanisms. To discard the pin is to disassemble the composition. Bloom is eager, in other words, to move beyond Clifford's sartorial cover and learn about the tricks of composition that lie therein.<sup>25</sup>

But Clifford's letter is only one half of this epistolary exchange. Also curious is Bloom's response, a composition that takes shape before the reader's eyes in "Sirens." From the beginning of his creative process, he approaches the act of writing in material terms: "Better write it here. Quills in the postoffice chewed and twisted. Bald Pat at a sign drew nigh. A pen and ink. He went. A pad. He went. A pad to blot" (11.821–23). Bloom listens to music in the intervening moments, and Pat returns with the necessary material accoutrements: "Bald deaf Pat brought quite glad pad ink. Pat set with ink pen quite flat pad. Pat took plate dish knife fork. Pat went" (11.847–48). With the moment of composition drawing nigh, the syntactical rhythms—sing-song and soothing—begin to echo a child's primer. What if we interpret this scene as the entr'acte between Bloom's quotidian conversations and his imminent scene of writing? Such a reading would suggest that Bloom's interior monologue dramatizes a transition between speaking and writing, as if negotiating the developmental narrative of becoming literate. And since Bloom understands "Pat" and "pad" as homophones, the waiter's baldness could also signify as the paper's blankness—the French idiom for writer's block being *la vertige de la page blanche*, or the vertigo of the white page. So imagined, Pat's baldness is not erasure but compositional lacuna.

Writing under the blotting paper's protective cover, Bloom can compose freely. His halting meditations suggest that he is thinking about sentence assemblage in terms of ink and paper, and the ensuing narrative belabors his writing process in crucially material terms:

Remember write Greek ees. Bloom dipped, Bloo mur: dear sir. Dear Henry wrote: dear Mady. Got your lett and flow. Hell did I put? Some pock or oth. It is utterl imposs. Underline imposs. To write today. [...] Bloom mur: best references. But Henry wrote: it will excite me. You know how. In haste. Henry. Greek ee. Better add postscript. What is he playing now? Improvising.



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Intermezzo. P. S. The rum tum tum. How will you pun? You punish me? (11.860–62, 888–91)

The material slowness of his writing process prompts Bloom to note and relish its nuances, from underlining “imposs[ible]” to the Greek “e” that slyly intimates his bohemian sensibilities. Dramatizing the composition process, he dismantles his own name into its phonetic ingredients, as if stocking a pantry of lexical ingredients. In so doing, he becomes playful.<sup>26</sup> In “Bloo mur: dear sir,” we can see that the closing letter of his name inspires him to think of the sartorial “bloomer” as well as the homophone lurking behind “mur: dear” (perhaps a clue that blotting paper is already inspiring new plots for detective fiction). But why is Bloom thinking about Bloom as he prepares to write in the persona of Henry Flower? Perhaps he murmurs along with his composition, subvocalizing the words as they take shape on the page. His hand’s lag and his half-penned words, then, expose a fleeting interlude between speaking and writing: the voice performs Bloom while the pen animates Henry Flower.

Bloom’s words in progress dramatize the suggestive overlaps between the lexical and purely acoustic. In penning the word “punish,” he must first write “pun,” a register of his sequential, letter-by-letter composition. But even if “pun” is merely a way station on the road to “punish,” it nonetheless reroutes his mind into a spiral of punning. Once again, Pat is fodder for Bloom’s wordplay: “Pat is a waiter hard of his hearing. Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. Hee hee. A waiter is he. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait” (915–19). The puns begin to test the boundaries between text and author when Bloom reaches the now-infamous allusion to Joyce’s 1907 *Chamber Music*: “Chamber music. Could make a kind of pun on that. It is a kind of music I often thought when she. Acoustics that is. Tinkling. . . . Diddleiddle addleaddle ooddleooddle. Hissss” (979–84). What began as a word-in-progress, “punish,” has led Bloom through an onomatopoeic fantasy that subsumes and then succeeds lexical meaning: “Prrpr. Must be the bur. Fff! Oo. Rrpr. . . . Prrprffrrppffff. Done” (1286–89, 1292). Here the episode memorably ends. Comedy aside, Bloom’s acoustic convolutions began with Pat’s pad, or blotting paper, a material that (as Molly earlier divulged to readers) Bloom relies upon for enclosure and privacy. This episode, then, illustrates how the materiality of writing—namely, the blotting pad—has creative ramifications and acoustic, even digestive, repercussions. In short, the freedoms afforded by one medium come to effect experiments in another.



Of course, Bloom has a history with blotting paper—an employment history. He was once a “traveller for blottingpaper” for Wisdom Hely’s, a past that he and the reader confront throughout Dublin (6.703). In “Lestrygonians” and “Wandering Rocks,” five men bearing advertising sandwich-boards navigate the city on foot, with “scarlet letters on their five tall white hats: H.E.L.Y.S. Wisdom Hely’s” (8.126). The letters disperse and coalesce with tidal fidelity, as if staging and restaging the assemblage of letters into words. The unusual spectacle prompts Bloom to recall his employment under Hely’s—fodder for some of his most creative advertising ideas, from the writer’s tell-tale inkblot (an inkbottle “with a false stain of black celluloid”) to a salacious scene of writing: “A transparent show cart with two smart girls sitting inside writing letters, copybooks, envelopes, blotting paper. I bet that would have caught on. Smart girls writing something catch the eye at once. Everyone dying to know what she’s writing” (8.131–35). Bloom here uncovers the scene of writing, laying bare the ephemeral secrets of women’s composition. Just as Austen and Woolf veiled their compositions with blotting paper, evading the public or familial gaze, Bloom imagines *lifting* such a veil in an act described by Jennifer Wicke as “voyeuristic reading” (1988, 166). The cart’s transparency is suggestive of a peepshow, but in this case the anticipated spectacle is women’s literacy. He twice refers to the featured girls as “smart,” the term doubly suggestive: they are intelligent enough to be literate, but they are also chic and modish in their demonstration of writing. And, in his ongoing quest to study the secrets of women’s authorship, Bloom had used the same adjective in seeking a “smart lady typist,” in the query that led him to Clifford in the first place.

A curious ambiguity motivates this scene’s critical reception. Wicke notes the “syntactical slippage” at play in this passage: “By the time one arrives at reading ‘envelopes’ and ‘blotting paper’ the words have become an inventory, not a description of what the girls would be writing” (167). This ambiguity, muses Wicke, suggests a “hesitat[ion] over whether they actually produce any writing. The semblance of writing, and the erotic charge of writing as hieroglyph of woman’s secret, are key here.” Although Wicke’s reading is persuasive, Bloom has taught us that we must understand writing’s ephemera as instrumental to composition. One can write a letter because the noun suggests both material and genre; but can one *write* blotting paper, the prepositions “on” or “with” conspicuously absent? Clifford *wrote* an envelope, after all, and we have by now become familiar with blotting paper’s utility for women writers. The slippage



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identified by Wicke is compelling reason for us to recognize these ephemeral media as emergent genres in modernist scenes of writing.

What can we learn, then, from Bloom's authorial failures? We can admire his would-be innovations in advertising, such as his clever rendering of an inkblot in black cellophane.<sup>27</sup> But readers may reasonably conclude that his name is unlikely to grace the bylines of *Titbits*, as he might have hoped, or appear on a cheap novel for sale at a Dublin bookstand. Even his idea for a detective story (the handwritten clues in mirror image on the fateful blotter) seems ill-timed. However, in what could be understood as an act of authorial charity, Joyce allows Bloom a shred of creative promise: his blotting paper idea, imagined in June 1904, precedes Doyle's August 1904 publication of "The Case of the Missing Three-Quarter" by an excruciatingly slim margin. The remarkable synchrony suggests that Bloom's authorial whims actually anticipated Doyle's—that Bloom might in fact have marketable (if undeveloped) talent in writing popular fiction.

Even as he has recently begun to experiment with the privacies afforded by material enclosure, Bloom has not yet surrendered his pen to the inkbottle's creative demons—not yet given free rein to the "round-headed monster" that crawls from Orlando's quill or the inky exploits of Shem the Penman, whose "murderous mirrorhand" I next examine. Even as the question of Bloom's authorship remains unresolved, Joyce would later introduce a writer whose authorial misadventures offer some answers.

## Postscript: modernist mirrorhands

In 1922, Joyce published *Ulysses* and began work on what would become *Finnegans Wake*. Only a few months earlier, Rorschach had also published his magnum opus. The eerie synchrony of their work assumes new urgency in Shem the Penman, whose scenes of writing are especially relevant to this discussion of ink's associations with imagination and criminality. As we saw earlier, his "murderous mirrorhand" and sojourn at the "Haunted Inkbottle" would suggest that he has a few gobolinks of his own. Shem and his work are mired in inky residues, with cognates appearing no fewer than thirty-five times, from "inkenstink" and "inkware" to "Inkupert" (Joyce 2012, 183.06, 182.09, 424.07). The tally quickly grows if we include "cuttlefishing" (173.36); Shem's "squidself" (186.06); the thirteen variations on "blot" that range from "Blottogaff" (522.22) to "blottom" (281.F2); "handworded" (21.20) and



“handsign” (407.23); or the dozens of words beginning with “pen,” from “Pencilmania” (228.19) to “penmarks” (421.18).

Although Rorschach does not enter the novel by name, his influence on Shem’s work is evident in the novel’s many psychoanalytic references. In the midst of the tavern brawl, for instance, we encounter this line: “All he bares subconscious inklings shadowed on soulskin” (2012, 377.27–28). And elsewhere, Shem’s literary crimes emerge alongside inkblots and their formal kin:

A blighty, a reeky, a lighty, a scrapy, a babbly, a ninny, dirty seventh among thieves and always bottom sawyer, till nowan knowed how howmely howme could be, giving unsolicited testimony on behalf of the absent, as glib as eaveswater to those present (who meanwhile, with increasing lack of interest in his semantics, allowed various subconscious smickers to drivel slowly across their fichers), unconsciously explaining, for inkstands, with a meticulousity bordering on the insane, the various meanings of all the different foreign parts of speech he misused and cuttle-fishing every lie unshrinkable about all the other people in the story, leaving out, of course, foreconsciously, the simple worf and plague and poison they had cornered him about until there was not a snoozer among them but was utterly undeceived in the heel of the reel by the recital of the rigmarole. (173.27–74.4)

Recurrently, Shem free-associates in the vicinity of ink. Notice how his words are unprompted by social etiquette or discourse, from “unsolicited testimony” and “unconsciously explaining” to the uninterested listeners “smicker[ing]” at his “babbly” talk, their “increasing lack of interest in his semantics” evident to all but Shem. The pseudo-idiomatic “for inkstands” and the whimsical “cuttlefishing” suggest that ink is in part responsible for this stream of discourse—evidence, I think, that Shem is thinking of or responding to the inkblot tests pioneered by Rorschach. Unsurprisingly, psychoanalytic diagnoses and vocabulary abound here, Shem’s “meticulousity bordering on the insane” suggesting an obsessive temperament, and a highly verbal one—as if talk therapy has unleashed a spate of free associations. Moreover, the passage engages consciousness at three distinct levels: first “subconscious[ly],” then “unconsciously,” and finally “foreconsciously.” Shem is scaling Freudian topographies of mind, and his climb is fueled by ink.

As if inspired by a klecksographic genealogy of haunted inkbottles and inkblots, Shem’s authorial crimes take place *within* the inkbottle—the



ultimate enclosure, as his inkbottle is plainly a space of privacy: "His penname SHUT sepiascraped on the doorplate and a blind of black sailcloth over its wan phwinshogue" (182.32–34). This private sphere is both enshrouded in "black sailcloth" (a harbinger of pirate ships or plague, and perhaps a reference to Shem's rogue creativity) and also besmeared with sepia ink. From the Greek *sepein*, to rot or make rotten, "sepia," could be understood as a curious link between composition and decomposition, and the term again links the creative and the animal; in keeping with Orlando's wombat or Kerner's imaginative creatures, sepia is not only a variety of ink but also the adaptive smokescreen of the cuttlefish. And in a bizarrely serendipitous genealogy, cuttlefish bones were once ground into pounce, a powder used for blotting ink.<sup>28</sup> The cuttlefish's utility, then, resembles the blot's contronymy in the sense that each encompasses inky play as well as the cleanup that must follow.

Just as Shem the Penman has a penname in Maistre Sheames de la Plume, there is no disputing that the novel repeatedly casts Shem as Joyce's authorial alter ego, or "outlex" (to borrow another apt coinage from the novel). But it is also compelling to understand Shem as Bloom's counterpoint or even revision. With his creativity enclosed and protected by the Haunted Inkbottle, an ideal space for indulging the seductions of popular fiction, Shem can enact authorial desires that necessarily remained dormant in Bloom. A murderous mirrorhand, then, is also a modernist mirrorhand.

Modernist authorship is fraught with inky duplicity. Indeed, the folded inkblot is itself a Janus-faced double, one that encompasses the highbrow *Ulysses* as well as the popular fiction consumed by its characters. To write is to harbor a known criminal, one whose ink-spattered travails threaten to expose the writer's demons. Particularly for women, writing constitutes a criminal (or, to borrow Woolf's term, "discreditable") practice, and has thus necessarily taken place in the shadows of public life. We return, finally, to blotting paper: a mantle for Austen's sitting-room compositions, a protective enclosure around Woolf's adolescent writings, and material cover for Bloom's authorial fantasies. What began as an adaptive mechanism transformed into a murky but generative space—an evolution that can and should be instructive. Recognizing that creativity dwells in both halves of the inkblot, we can become attuned to the unseen work of outlexes and doodling wordsmiths alike. It is essential to shelter the writer's free play and incubate the inky creatures that sidle from the pen.





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Emily James is assistant professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. She has written about scenes of composition and creativity in the work of Joan Easdale, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley.

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## Notes

1. Helen Sword explains that modernists were “intrigued and attracted by spiritualism’s ontological shiftiness” and “its subversive celebrations of alternate, often explicitly feminine, modes of writing” (2002, 8–9). Bette London attributes the “revival” in mediumship to World War I and notes that automatic writing was especially popular “when literary modernism was at its height” (2007, 625). This confluence, according to London, was connected to a cultural fascination with creativity: “Modern mediumship and automatism provided new forms of access to the study of mental and creative processes, to the modes by which the mind . . . receives and transmits information” (624). The phenomenon prompted gendered reactions: “Women’s automatism turned writing into a performance—one that would appear to receive its validation from the men who observed, analyzed, and documented it” (625).
2. Citing Gerard Manley Hopkins’s proclivity for tmesis (“brim, in a flash, ful”), A. M. Klein claims that “the Rorschach is the tmesis of the visual” (1994, 128). The comment suggests that we examine the making of the inkblot’s bilateral form: does the paper’s folding constitute a fissure, or, by doubling does it extend? The term tmesis means “cutting,” but we must then ask, what or who cleaves the image in two?
3. In fact, Joyce referred to his long string of childhood homes as “haunted inkpots” (O’Brien 1999, 2). I thank Amanda Golden for the reference.
4. Curiously, the original monograph included only ten of fifteen inkblots, with the book’s printers hesitant to produce the unusual and costly images. All of these images were altered and damaged by the printer’s work—what Aronow, Reznikoff, and Moreland have described as the “incredible and almost



accidental formation” of the images that would come to define the Rorschach inkblot text throughout the twentieth century (1994, 3).

5. Rorschach was not the only one to apply inkblots in psychological evaluation. As early as 1896, researchers Alfred Binet and Victor Henri had cited the inkblot as a trigger for what they termed “involuntary imagination” (quoted in Richardson 2011, 134). Across the Atlantic, Howard Andrew Knox, an assistant surgeon at Ellis Island, developed the Inkblot Imagination Test in 1914. Using a set of asymmetrical inkblots, he asked his participants, a group of fifty Italian emigrants: “What do these spots look like and what do they remind you of?” (quoted in Richardson 2011, 132–33). Consider the inkblot’s similarity to another tool that emerged during this time: just as the x-ray’s scopic powers seemed to unpeel the body’s privacies, the inkblot, sometimes termed the “psychological x-ray,” was thought to unveil the subconscious imagination (Wood et al, 2003, 1).

6. James Geary writes: “Rorschach’s method is a form of physiognomic perception, yet another example of the human brain’s determination to find patterns in absolutely everything. Even when presented with images with few or no recognizable features, we still find patterns in them—animal shapes in cloud formations, human faces in Martian craters, figures of the Virgin Mary in grilled cheese sandwiches, and butterflies in inkblots” (2011, 63).

7. See Pater 1980, 98–99 and Auden 2007, 179, 594.

8. W. J. T. Mitchell conceives of the ekphrastic relationship as “an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object” (1994, 164). The relationship is fraught with asymmetries: “Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse” (157).

9. Implicit here is the suggestion, according to Reed, that “writing verse is just another form of rote intellectual labor” (2013, 68). Dan Farrell’s work, in challenging the inkblot’s affiliations with creativity, poses difficult questions about whether randomness is ever really random.

10. I refer here to Hugh Kenner’s foundational study, *The Mechanic Muse* (1987), as well as to subsequent work by Mark Seltzer (1992), Tim Armstrong (1998), Friedrich Kittler (1999), and Pamela Thurschwell (2001).

11. Kate Flint describes the letter as “redolent of emotion” and notes that “the fluids of composition and of sentiment seem interchangeable” (1991, 361). But this scene was a late addition in Woolf’s revision process. Reading the holograph manuscript of *Jacob’s Room*, Flint notes that earlier drafts of the novel begin with Jacob himself, and reads this shift in focus as evidence of Woolf’s changing regard for gender and writing.



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12. In an anonymous essay published in 1856 in *Westminster Review*, George Eliot took aim at “the frothy, the prosy, the pious, [and] the pedantic”—the combination of which she casts as “feminine fatuity” (1883, 178). Such novels, she imagines, must be written “in elegant boudoirs, with violet-coloured ink and a ruby pen” (180).

13. I am grateful to Elisa Kay Sparks for examining Eleanor’s blots alongside the novel’s sunflower imagery and, in so doing, drawing attention to some curious marginalia captured by Mitchell Leaska’s 1977 edition of Woolf’s *The Pargiters*. As if doodling alongside her characters, Woolf has left her own record of inkblots, many of them transformed into doodles. Sparks notes that these doodles “chart a course parallel to Eleanor’s ink spots in the novel, evolving from a simple asterisk formed of three intersecting lines . . . into more complex figures”—figures that, in Sparks’s reading, closely resemble flowers (2013, 122).

14. The blotting paper may be in holes because of overuse and austerity. In *Jacob’s Room*, the narrator compares the handwritten correspondence of Mrs. Flanders and Mrs. Jarvis to “the unpublished works of women, written by the fireside in pale profusion, dried by the flame, for the blotting-paper’s worn to holes and the nib cleft and clotted” (Woolf 1950, 91). Blotting paper may also have become instrumental to women because of its household utility; in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh recalls how Clarissa’s “Aunt Helena used to press [flowers] between sheets of grey blotting-paper with Littré’s dictionary on top, sitting under the lamp after dinner. She was dead now” (1981, 162).

15. Of course, Orlando began this poem when she was he; the first page, penned in 1586, is in “her own boyish hand” (2006, 154). Crossing letters, or cross-hatching, was a popular form of epistolary economy in the nineteenth century. A crossed letter resembled a palimpsest, with script running left to right and also bottom to top. For greater detail, see Beal (2008, 102–3).

16. Woolf coined the phrase “frock consciousness” in a diary entry dated April 27, 1925:

People have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c. The fashion world at the Becks—Mrs Garland was there superintending a display—is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I’m always coming back to it. (1977–1984, vol. 3, 12–13)

17. *Orlando* cleverly introduces the nineteenth century in terms of climate. The sky, now a “bruised and sullen canopy,” spreads dampness throughout the



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country: "Damp swells the wood, furs the kettle, rusts the iron, rots the stone" (2006, 166). But it also creeps into the mind: "Love, birth, and death were all swaddled in a variety of fine phrases. The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated" (167). And worse, because "there is no stopping damp," "it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork—sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes" (168, emphasis mine).

18. The image is a favorite of Woolf's: she sometimes used the term "gallop" to describe a productive spate of writing (Podnieks 2000, 238).

19. Automatic writing is a practice associated with twentieth-century modernity. See Armstrong 1998.

20. Much of the scholarship focused on popular fiction and *Ulysses* concerns Gerty MacDowell's sentimental curriculum in "Nausicaa." Suzette Henke, for instance, suggests that "Gerty MacDowell is James Joyce's Emma Bovary. Her mind is thoroughly imbued with the orts, scraps, and fragments of Victorian popular culture" (1982, 133); Henke sees Gerty as directly influenced, for example, by Gertrude Flint, the protagonist of Maria Cummins's 1854 novel *The Lamplighter*, and Kimberly Devlin (1985) finds Gertrude provides an ironic contrast to Gerty. For wider-ranging discussions of Joyce's fascination with popular culture—as well as popular culture's fascination with him—see *Joyce and Popular Culture*, edited by R. B. Kershner (1996). Finally, Kershner's *The Culture of Joyce's "Ulysses"* is useful in distinguishing the subgenres of popular fiction most important to *Ulysses*—from Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories to the "tiny splinter genre" of circus novels, such as *Ruby: The Pride of the Ring* (2010, 9).

21. In thinking about Joycean mirrorhand, another relevant passage is the typesetting in reverse that Bloom observes in "Aeolus" (Joyce 1993, 7.205–6).

22. Bloom's fascination with Raoul—"For him! For Raoul!" (Joyce 1993, 10.609)—began with a steamy scene in *Sweets of Sin*, the novel he picked up from a bookstall, one endorsed enthusiastically by the phlegm-puking, rheumy-eyed shopman in "Wandering Rocks." Unable to locate the novel's provenance, Don Gifford and Robert Seidman speculate that *Sweets of Sin* is likely an example of "soft-core dime-novel pornography" (1998, 272).

23. Just as Bloom's early attempts at a writing career dwell almost entirely on his cuffs, the novel suggests that his ideal reader is Stephen Dedalus. Earlier, in conversation with Buck Mulligan in "Telemachus," Stephen had gazed at (and just beyond) his cuff: "Across the threadbare cuffedge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the wellfed voice beside him" (Joyce 1993, 1.106–7).



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The cuff's materiality is a visual anchor for near-sighted Stephen. As his eyes focus on the fraying threads of the proximal cuff, the distal sea blurs into a vista of green—one imprecise and abstract enough to support his stream of consciousness. With the sea strategically blurred before him, he exhumes his mother with sensory descriptors that alternate between eerie (an “odour of wax and rosewood”) and unsettling (“the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver”) (1.104, 109–10). His short-sighted fixation on the cuff, in other words, supports his composition and comprises a sartorial link between the writing careers—one unlikely, the other promising—of Bloom and Stephen.

24. Milly's letter, too, is rich with compositional lore, and Bloom studies it with care. Presumably handwritten, it closes first rather formally (“with fondest love”) but then in haste: “P. S. Excuse bad writing am in hurry. Byby” (Joyce 1993, 4.413). Milly's scrawled postscript resembles her father's stream of consciousness, as if she has inherited his predilection for staccato fragments and halting syntax. Whether “bad writing” refers to syntactical or graphic badness is unclear. In either case, her style suggests improvisatory, dashed-off haste: in other words, she neither painstakingly crosses her letters nor scrupulously encrypts her letters as Austen might have done. Though writing a private letter, Milly does little to ensure or protect its privacy; instead, her writing is spontaneous and impulsive. Perhaps, then, *Ulysses* suggests that Milly, born on the cusp of the twentieth century, can write freely and without cover.

25. Too, the pin might be understood in terms of mechanical parts. Recall the well-documented slippage at play in the word “typewriter,” which can signify the machine, its woman operator, or both. If typewriter Clifford is short one pin, then her mechanical counterpart would be similarly faulty—a mechanical idiosyncrasy that would texture her writing—another trope of composition familiar to readers of detective fiction, such as Doyle's account of a typewriter in “A Case of Identity” (1891).

26. Gifford and Seidman note that the Greek “e” could have suggested “an artistic temperament” (1998, 304).

27. For some, Bloom's inkblot may resemble the full stop at the end of “Ithaca,” a textual feature that has triggered, according to Austin Briggs, “an astonishing range of critical interpretation” (1996, 125). As if rehearsing associations in the style of Rorschach, Briggs asks: “Is the dot a dot indeed or a stop of closure or a puncture of aperture?” (139).

28. James Daybell explains: “Pounce (also known as ‘pin-dust’), made from powdered pumice or cuttlefish, was used both to prepare the paper . . . and to absorb excess ink after writing, as a precursor to blotting paper” (2012, 41).



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# Writing Underground: Ralph Ellison and the Novel

Cheryl Alison

What does it mean to be down a hole? This is one question Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* makes us ask when we finish the novel's epilogue, for there the unnamed narrator indicates his plan to emerge from the underground state in which he has spent his storytelling time, but the book does not represent this emergence. Relatedly, we might wonder, what attracts one to being underground? Or, what kind of creature-creator hibernates—might even in some way *dig* hibernating? "Bear with me," Ellison's narrator writes as he closes the prologue (1952, 14).<sup>1</sup> But we understand that as well as enjoining patience from his audience he might also be encouraging the reader to *be* a bear with him, to hole up—as we necessarily do if we read the pages of this bulky novel. Inquiring into the significance of *occupying a hole* in Ellison, this essay also explores the author's historically complex relationship to the novel form's potential for capaciousness. Novelistic looseness is by no means synonymous with formal incompleteness, but in Ellison's case the two states have noticeable affinities, affinities made clearer by the case of the second novel (–to-be) that never followed *Invisible Man* as a finished novel but whose drafting occupied Ellison for nearly half his life.

Following her husband's death in 1994, Fanny Ellison asked his literary executor, John F. Callahan, what he made of the extensive draft material Ellison had accumulated toward the second novel: "Beginning, middle, and end. Does it have a beginning, middle, and end?" (quoted in Callahan and De Santis 2000, 605). The second, incomplete novel, as both Adam Bradley (2010) and Barbara Foley (2010) have documented, partially developed out of *Invisible Man*, though over the decades its focus shifted, a testament to its author's ongoing creative presence in an increasingly extended form. I return to this draft and Fanny Ellison's question later in this essay, but I introduce them now because they have



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helped to inspire my discussion of both *Invisible Man* and Ellison's less-than-straightforward relationship to beginnings, middles, and endings. In developing my sense of Ellison's "underground" approach to writing the novel, I also consider how this approach might have led to both one complete, celebrated novel and a second novelistic work whose form Ellison never quite could, or perhaps never entirely wanted to, complete. (To be clear, I discuss novels within a particularly Ellisonian framework; while a larger version of this argument might venture into more theoretical territory regarding different ways to understand the novel as a genre, I focus on what seems to have been Ellison's handling of the form.)

It is by now almost a truism that Ellison criticism frequently disappoints Ellison appreciators.<sup>2</sup> For now, let me say that two pieces of Ellison interpretation stand as companions to my argument. In *Ralph Ellison in Progress: From "Invisible Man" to "Three Days Before the Shooting . . ."*, Adam Bradley pays close attention to *Invisible Man*'s composition history. Appealingly, Bradley reads *Invisible Man* "from the perspective of [Ellison's] final, unfinished novel" to see "them both as works in progress" (2010, 3–4), and his study offers a refreshing alternative to readings that take *Invisible Man* as the pinnacle of Ellison's career. But *Ralph Ellison in Progress* is less interested in offering an interpretation of *Invisible Man*'s narrative circumstances than in thinking through Ellison's authorial progress from the first to the infamous, incomplete second novel. By contrast, H. William Rice offers what could be a tantalizing set of situational analogues in *Ralph Ellison and the Politics of the Novel* (2003), but his censoriousness replaces close reading and the curiosity affection for literature generates. Rice is a quieter companion in this essay, as his conclusions tend to reduce both book and author.<sup>3</sup> I explore the analogues Rice both explicitly and implicitly sets up—*Invisible Man*'s narrator in his hole; Ellison's style of protracted composition; the second novel's unfinished state—but without his prosecutorial impulse to assess Ellison's "failure" as a political animal and as a writer. At the same time, I maintain Bradley's attention to Ellison's compositional modes but bring this focus to bear more directly on the novelistic form of *Invisible Man* and its narrator's situation. Via this mixture of thematic, formal, biographical, and literary-historical approaches, I aim to arrive at a vantage able to consider in its complexity the question with which I began and Ellison implicitly leaves us in *Invisible Man*: what does it mean to be down a hole?

Procedurally speaking, I put Ellison's affinity for shorter forms like the essay in tension with what seems to have been his difficulty inhabiting



the novel's roomier allowance. Even as a novelist Ellison usually wrote episodically, which is to say, in story nuggets, only with great effort and outside help moving from their proliferation toward publishable closure. I consider this penchant formally and also thematically and metaphorically, in relation to the "hole" in which the narrator resides. Here Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome concept becomes useful in thinking through the intricacy of the hole as structure. Is it a locked-in space or can it (also) be an expansive one? By delving into the hole in the following pages, I hope to show that for Ellison the novel's relative permissiveness, in tandem with his desire to close the form, seems to have made writing the novel particularly grueling. For him, finding a way out of the novel would prove anything but simple. Ellison's prolonged occupation of his manuscripts offers insight into his compositional process as well as into the risks, pleasures, and strain of a brand of artistic, almost Deleuzoguattarian, nomadism.

## §

Ellison criticism has surveyed the narrator's subterranean position and its disputable degree of finality. But such exploration has been too sure and carried out chiefly according to set coordinates: the novel and its author's political (in)efficacy.<sup>4</sup> If *Invisible Man's* plot and historical context as well as Ellison's highly public profile, racially marginal status as an African American, and perceived political quietude amid the race rights fight make such a reception understandable, we nonetheless end up with a debate whose binary terms stifle creative engagement with what is, after all, a work of art. In broadest strokes, the debate's questions sound something like this: *Does the narrator emerge? Do we understand this emergence or lack thereof as sociopolitically progressive or conservative?*<sup>5</sup> One of the most balanced readings of this manhole retreat, a 1984 essay by Michael G. Cooke, nevertheless falls finally into line and labels the narrator's retreat a "failure" (1984, 109), since "no conversion, no positive new commitment or conviction, actually emerges from the hole any more than the invisible man himself emerges" (108).

To be fair, Ellison has not helped matters. Across the years, he reinforced the shape of this debate in a twofold way. First, he suggested that the epilogue's final uncertainty is answerable and that answering it matters because he himself kept doing so. Second, and relatedly, he implied the undesirability of remaining below ground through his



repeated assertions that the narrator does *come up*, regardless of Ellison's authorial decision not to write such a scene. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995) mentions this emergence more than a couple of times, and *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (1995) documents similar statements beginning in 1954 and continuing at least into the 1970s. One begins to wonder just what was at stake for Ellison in this emergence, both in not writing it and in ever afterward asserting it as a *fait accompli*. In a 1969 address at West Point, he responded to a student who, interestingly, does not ask if the narrator emerges, with the assurance that he does in fact surface: "As to the last part of your question, I would say that yes, he comes out of the ground" (1995a, 537).<sup>6</sup>

It is a testament to the historico-political breadth of *Invisible Man*, the scope of the characters, movements, and geographies Ellison brings into play, that a great deal has seemed to rest on its ending. Not much has been made, for example, of the similarly nebulous ending of a novel by a then-contemporary author—one who was also for some time a close Ellison friend. Saul Bellow ends his 1964 novel, *Herzog*, with the eponymous hero "stretched out" on a "Recamier couch" ([1964] 2003, 371), classier cousin to the "malodorous sofa" (6) on which we find him near the book's beginning, half in and half out of life, as it were. Moses E. Herzog thinks he is ready to stop his obsessive letter writing (he has been sending out letters to people both alive and known to him as well as dead and famous) and rejoin society, but amid his plans we hear a "perhaps." "Perhaps he'd stop writing letters" (371). Bellow's narrative reach is not commensurate with Ellison's; *Herzog* does not ask the same questions of its nation. Similarly, Bellow's character, while Jewish, does not come off as alike embroiled in racial struggle (we remember that *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided two years after *Invisible Man*'s publication), however individualized this struggle arguably remains in *Invisible Man*. The stakes of the character's re-entrance into the world, in other words, might not seem equal to what we get in Ellison.

Still, I think we miss out in coming to the "hole" of *Invisible Man* if assessments of the novel's or its author's political failure or success, no matter how reasonable such judgments may be, define its reception. A more literarily attuned model can help, one reluctant to cast aside the import of the novel's form in considering what to make of the narrator's cozy hole. In some ways this endeavor will mean not just letting the hole occupy the final scene, where emergence seems the salient question, but also recognizing its relevance throughout, and even beyond, *Invisible*



*Man*. Let's put off surfacing and spend time with Ellison's handling of the novel, his style of writing and structural tendencies, to see how we can differently approach this subterranean situation.

If Ellison and his critics seem to have accepted a debate framework that limits what might otherwise be more intriguing, my sense is that Ellison joined this conversation because he felt his artistic integrity, for lack of a better word, was at stake. He did not want his literary character or himself viewed as perpetually stuck and his art to seem likewise impaired. Challenged along the lines of his political relevance, he felt compelled similarly to answer.<sup>7</sup> But here I have the luxury of being able to admire what such *stuckness* might literarily give us in *Invisible Man* and what it might have done, creatively, for Ellison. As might already be clear, this essay accepts Roland Barthes's assertion: "The pleasure of the text does not prefer one ideology to another" (1975, 31).<sup>8</sup> In the structural circumstance of being *holed up*—authorially, novelistically, or as a reader—there is room for what makes *Invisible Man* and Ellison the writer continue to captivate some of us. And this capture might have something to do with the very ongoing quality Ellison contradicts in the certainty of his answer at West Point.

## §

Let us return to that inelegant word *stuckness*, whose very awkwardness in naming a state of imperfect progress seems fitting. If we temporarily give up wondering whether the narrator makes it out or not—and what this means for *Invisible Man* as a social and political text—we can start otherwise to consider the underground quality of the novel and its author's reported difficulty in surfacing from the compositional process. Our understanding of *Invisible Man*'s, to repeat the phrase, *subterranean situation* has to be informed by Ellison's habitual approach to writing, an approach that might in turn impact how we interpret the narrator's fictional circumstance. The narrator's subterranean dwelling opens and closes the novel in the prologue and epilogue, but when he tells the tale we read in the chapters making up the novel's middle, there he implicitly still is. The underground enclosure—we might dub it a burrow since, as the narrator says, it "extended farther than I could see" (*IM* 567)—stretches through the novel as its storytelling scene. And, as I hope to show, Ellison's writing style effects formally the subterranean tunneling already thematically rendered as locale, combining mobile dimension and contraction. At once under way and halting, such a style makes camp here and there.



In other words, while the underground is a terrain in *Invisible Man*, it is also a formal effect generated by the novel's author, who seems to have responded to the wide open possibility afforded by an as-yet-unshaped plot trajectory by rendering tighter and tighter internal spaces. David Kurnick has a wonderful, apposite phrase in his book *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (2012). Setting the novel's tendency toward social isolation against theater's relative sociality, Kurnick writes that one Jamesian character issues "a cry for help as the walls of the novel—and the novelistic—close around her" (2012, 139). And Kurnick's anti-cloistering perspective has humorous company in the black wit of Ellison contemporary Flann O'Brien, whose de Selby laments the lost "art of going out and staying there" ([1967] 1993, 22). "Evidently," the narrator tells us, de Selby's "main objection was to the confinement of a roof and four walls." By strong contrast, *Invisible Man* seems eager for such closure—and more. As the narrator proclaims early on, "When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor" (*IM* 7). Yet perversely, rather than meaning expansion's end (a compact novel, perhaps), in Ellison's case this cloistering urge leads, as we will see, to considerable extension. Like the creature resembling a mole in Franz Kafka's "The Burrow," Ellison the novel-builder prodigiously proliferates his "little round cells" and "far-flung passages" (Kafka 1976, 326–27): subterranean subdivision.

Readers accustomed to *Invisible Man* can no doubt recollect its episodes: the battle royal; Trueblood's blues tale; Lucius Brockway at Liberty Paints; or the party at the Chthonian, for example. It is my sense that we can readily recall these episodes in such a way, by discrete monikers and however formally untitled they are, for the very reason that each episode has a *particulate* quality of enclosure that keeps it from melding into the larger narrative. Regarding Ellison's novel-writing habits, Adam Bradley notes that he "composed episodically" (2010, 175), crafting these "picaresque episodes" (179) as narrative tidbits not necessarily allied to a strict temporal scheme. Ellison seems to have localized his focus to the story tidbit near to hand and then to the next, and so on.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the burrow as "an animal rhizome" (1987, 12). Instead of rising upward in neat architectural stories, the rhizome stretches sideways and increases itself nonhierarchically. The rhizome, the authors tell us, has its own syntax, one uninterested in logic that moves with a purpose from here to there. Rather, "the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and . . . and . . .



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and . . .” (25). Such an additive approach wants to keep accruing new, not necessarily *orientated* directions: *this, and this, and this—and this too*, it says.<sup>9</sup> *Invisible Man* as textual object to a degree obscures Ellison the rhizomatic composer. It has both a beginning and an end—no publisher would have accepted it without at least material boundaries. Yet there’s still the middle, the very big middle of *Invisible Man*, “always a middle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). Ellison’s book is part rhizome and part tree (“the classical book,” with its “left to right or right to left” [5, 23]). It takes getting into the novel fully to find its odd sprawl and the Ellison who liked or couldn’t help adding story units in the “and . . . and . . . and . . .” style Deleuze and Guattari describe.

Before we explore how this “and . . . and . . . and . . .” looks and feels in the novel, though, it is worth saying that although this style of writing makes for the strangely suitable quality of each episode’s self-enclosure as if each were a cave only barely connected to its fellows by a narrow crawl space, it also caused the author some grief. While Ellison might have enjoyed composing in this way, it is important to think as well about the challenge his compositional style posed to the larger internal connectivity toward which he seems to have aspired as a novelist. The novel, after all, has not traditionally been an apartment building (the urban architectural equivalent, perhaps, of a collection of short stories), much less a subterranean series of dugouts. Rather, one imagines Ellison envisioning it more like the Jamesian figure of a “house,” a house with “not one window, but a million” (James 1934, 46), whose rooms in theory breathe one to the next as part of a larger domestic interior. In *Invisible Man*, however, the move between episodes offers little circulation of air, and Ellison agonized over his difficulty in creating more connective flow between them or, to use his metaphor, in “making bridges”:

Hersey: You mentioned “making bridges” a minute ago. I remember that you once said that your anxiety about transitions greatly prolonged the writing of *Invisible Man*.

Ellison: Yes, that has continued to be something of a problem. (Ellison 1995b, 284)

The above exchange between John Hersey and Ellison took place in 1974. By this time, Ellison had been working on his second novel for just over twenty years and was in as good a position as any to remember how much trouble he had had the first time around in writing *Invisible Man*.



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Adam Bradley describes Ellison as “always bedeviled by transitions” (2010, 17), and *Invisible Man*’s seven-year writing process to some degree attests to just how hard it was to “make bridges,” a difficulty that was one partly because Ellison made such distinct story parts. He “composed episodically, so transitions had great significance in his compositional process” (175). As a writer who had trouble, in his own words, “get[ting] from A to B to C” (Ellison 1995a, 222), Ellison tended toward a cellular format: A and B and C and. . . . If one spends time with these pieces’ points of contact, it is possible to feel the author creating the crawl space to make it from cell to cell, manufacturing as if on site transit’s possibility.

The narrator inhabits one such thematically portrayed enclosure. In reading *Invisible Man*, the reader moves through a series of them as the formal aggregate constituted by Ellison’s way of writing. Indeed, the novel’s burrows operate, if differently, on character, reader, and author. Much of this effect in *Invisible Man* comes, as I have suggested, from Ellison’s difficulty with smooth transitions, arguably a formal weakness become compositionally apt. His very awkwardness in transitioning from here to there makes for the bottlenecking of passageways that come to feel like a warren or series of hidey-holes. As a defining characteristic of Ellison’s move between story pieces, his reliance on simple phrasing increases the sensed constriction between the text’s successive units.

Running our eyes over these junctions, we can clearly see their service-oriented function, but let’s begin almost at the beginning to trace some of the lines of this narrative bottlenecking. Ellison’s prose style elsewhere is often playful and varied, making more marked his lack of variety in accomplishing these moves. Following the prologue’s abrupt concluding request, “Bear with me” (*IM* 14), chapter 1 prepares the way for its memorable episode, the battle royal, with the relatively terse sentence, “It goes a long way back, some twenty years” (15). A narrow entryway. But inside the episode the scene expands, moving away from such concision through visceral, mobile description and layered clauses that plump up Ellison’s sentences and heighten our impression of narrative dimension. Here is one exemplary sentence from amid the battle royal episode: “Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies” (27). The extravagance of motion (*lifted, dropped, landing, beating, twitching, stung*); of texture (*glistening, wet*);



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and of simile and metaphor (*like a circus seal, beating a frenzied tattoo, like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies*) creates a quasi-physical dimensionality that, in concert with like adjacent prose, effectively pushes the episode's walls outward for the reader. After a narrow, close entryway, we occupy this story cell and it occupies us through the lavish linguistic effects Ellison has wrought in lingering there to render the segment's violence and consequence.

As we leave the episode, the tunnel narrows again. After the traumatizing and sadistic events of the battle royal, Ellison leads us to the next episode, in which we find the narrator at college, with a small, closing parenthetical paragraph: "(It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend college.)" (33). The succeeding scene opens in chapter 2 with, "It was a beautiful college" (34). Ellison uses "It goes," as we saw above, to open the battle royal episode and "It was" both in closing the same and in opening the next episode. This kind of utilitarian exit out of one story enclosure and entry into the next feels utilitarian because of the perfunctory quality of the language that momentarily constrains Ellison's tendency toward elegant, elaborate phrasing. The short sentences marking the move from high school's end to college's beginning, or the move from chapter 1 to 2, *First I had to attend college / It was a beautiful college*, again emphasize Ellison's rudimentary, even forced approach to joining his story parts. We trundle between episodes with their "between" almost a narrative blank spot, an "inter-" perennially under construction.

Jumping a little ahead in the novel to the narrator's college scenes, we see more of the expansiveness characterizing Ellison's almost opulent prose when he is not trying to make the move "from A to B" but is instead well inside either A or B. Here is one sentence from a scene in chapter 5. The narrator is headed to the college chapel; as Ellison richly conveys, it is evening time:

Above the decorous walking around me, sounds of footsteps leaving the verandas of far-flung buildings and moving toward the walks and over the walks to the asphalt drives lined with whitewashed stones, those cryptic messages for men and women, boys and girls heading quietly toward where the visitors waited, and we moving not in the mood of worship but of judgment; as though even here in the filtering dusk, here beneath the deep indigo sky, here, alive with looping swifts and darting moths, here in the hereness of the night not yet lighted by the moon



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that looms blood-red behind the chapel like a fallen sun, its radiance shedding not upon the here-dusk of twittering bats, nor on the there-night of cricket and whippoorwill, but focused short-rayed upon our place of convergence; and we drifting forward with rigid motions, limbs stiff and voices now silent, as though on exhibit even in the dark, and the moon a white man's bloodshot eye. (109-10)

It is hard not to note how the author who crafts sentences like the above reverberating prose poem, this author with his phrases of "here in the hereness of the night," who sings into the sentence until it is fat and swollen with its twilight sense, seems to croak when it comes to the moment of transition. To conduct us into this chapel episode, Ellison closes the previous scene with the abrupt sentence, "And I had to attend chapel" (108). Period. At such times and in the background there is almost a quiet *Will this do?*

Ellison does not always use the same formula to build bridges. In a similarly practical fashion, he favored transitions that start with "When" or "Then"; he was economical and tended to reuse. "It was" is a frequent joining tool that also serves, for example, to move between the episodes detailing the narrator's trip into Harlem and his stay there at Men's House; "It was a clean little room with a dark orange bedspread" (162), chapter 8 begins. And then Ellison proceeds into the next story structure containing Peter Wheatstraw with chapter 9's opening: "It was a clear, bright day when I went out" (172). "I was" sometimes works as well as "It was," but again we sense an author effortfully making his way between episodes or, more accurately, *making a between* where before there was not one. Recurrently in Ellison the mini story enclosure is the thing, made alive via vibrant description, with the mode of transit retroactively and onerously performed. In *Invisible Man's* later drafting stages, Ellison had given up hope of making transitions fluidly and "agreed to sprinkle ordinary transitions—'that,' 'and,' 'therefore,' 'so,' and 'then,'" so as to make progress on the draft (Jackson 2002, 423).

The stuffy serviceability of these passageways causes each episode's enclosure to feel the more self-sufficiently dimensional: a "warm hole" after "warm hole" (*IM* 6) within the bigger textual warren. *Now . . .* we have finished the hospital scene in which the narrator is almost lobotomized. *Next . . .* we will meet Mary Rambo. *Then . . .* In discussing Ellison's compositional difficulty, Adam Bradley writes, "The burden is on the writer to fit the various scraps of fiction together into a whole. Like



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a tailor sewing a garment, the writer must work the seams in such a way that they bind the pieces without calling attention to themselves" (2010, 176). Ellison's worry over transitions seems to suggest he shared this ideal, but (although Bradley never says anything so ungenerous) the bindings make known the effort entailed. The narrator moves from passage to passage in the course of his tale, and we feel these series of enclosures for the strange inelegance of the byways through which we are made to burrow, traversing as it were the ellipses in Deleuze and Guattari's model: and . . . and . . . and. . . .

Ellison's compositional struggle conceivably arose from combining an episodic writing style with attention to both novelistic length and coherence. The novel can and usually is meant to go on for some duration. A shorter form risks being a novella or even a short story, hardly Ellison's ambition when he wrote in the company of literary "ancestors" like Hemingway, "Dostoevsky[,] and Faulkner," as he later designated them in his 1963–64 essay, "The World and the Jug" (1995a, 185).<sup>10</sup> Ellison meant to produce a *novel*, the form of literature he most admired, despite or perhaps because of novelists' "special, though difficult, freedom" (1995b, 147). Novels also go on according to some bounded trajectory, however minimal, loosely conceived, or disjunctive it might be in this late era of modernism. Of course, going *anywhere*, rather than taking things in some order and heading *there*, poses no problem for rhizomatic writing because the "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25). The art of being in the middle of a form, dwelling amid a state of ongoing composition, is the art of the rhizome. There is a keeping going that can be considered proper to such writing, which obeys less the signs of the road than its own inclinations and curiosity.<sup>11</sup> When it comes to the *intermezzo*, certain things that might seem pertinent, even vital, suddenly *aren't*. "Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions" for the rhizome operator. Indeed, belowground, *Invisible Man's* narrator has "learned to live without direction" (IM 577), which he considers better than the aboveground "passion to make men conform to a pattern" (576). This pattern, after all, has *run* him from high school to Harlem ("I'd run, been run, chased, operated" [559]) until, he attests, "the next step I couldn't make, so I've remained in the hole" (575).

Ellison's desire to publish, however, to have a reading public, made directional questions painfully relevant. In a reversal that would with time



prove only provisional for the author, Ellison's belowground approach to storytelling had agonizingly to be transformed for the aboveground publishing world. As he said to James Alan McPherson circa 1970, "I just don't think that we can escape from form, because when you write a piece of fiction, you write it to be read" (1995a, 364). *Invisible Man's* transitions seem to have been one formal issue ultimately of concern to Ellison—its ending was another. "The end, the climax," Ellison had written to his publisher Peggy Hitchcock, "evades me" (quoted in Jackson 2002, 335). Hence, when, after working tirelessly on the novel initially promised to publishers in 1945 and yearly delayed thereafter as pages of writing multiplied,<sup>12</sup> Ellison needed to exit its compositional space, secure the borders of his warren, and present the manuscript, he brought in the heavy construction workers. A rhizome dweller and rhizome maker who means to publish a novel needs house-building friends, and luckily Ellison at this time (he was more isolated as the years went on) had plenty.<sup>13</sup>

The struggle *Invisible Man's* closure meant for Ellison can be only partially measured, but some indication is available through the team he had helping to get the novel together at the last: "*Invisible Man* was nearly seven years in the making and . . . it took its final shape only after a Herculean exertion of editorial will in the months before publication by Ellison and a host of others, including his editor, Albert Erskine, his wife, Fanny, and a close group of literary conferees that included Stanley Edgar Hyman, Albert Murray, and Harry Ford" (A. Bradley 2010, 7). Hyman's name in particular recurs in histories of this pre-publishing moment as the literary critic—Hyman was a staff writer for the *New Yorker*—become chthonian guide who helped Ellison find his way out of *Invisible Man* so that it could, as closed artifact, be published. Ellison's friend Ted Weiss reportedly said, "I thought Stanley Hyman was instrumental in helping Ralph pull the material together for *Invisible Man*. . . . Hyman helped him find the shape of the book, trimmed it, and gave it form and order" (quoted in Rampersad 2007, 538). As biographer Lawrence Jackson paraphrases Ellison, the latter wrote to Hyman in 1949 with "hopes that he could produce a house" of the pieces he was "toss[ing] around" (2002, 392). Ellison, however, risked falling far short of his hoped-for production.

The danger was not that of producing a "delightfully irregular" house, one perhaps like Mr. Jarndyce's Bleak House designed by Charles Dickens a hundred years earlier.<sup>14</sup> For if in Bleak House "you lost yourself in passages," "wondering how you got . . . there" (Dickens [1852–53] 2003, 80–81), such a building still stands. Following *Invisible Man's*



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publication, the novel's epilogue might have received mixed reviews, which Adam Bradley synthesizes well as ranging from perceptions of its sensed "artificial[ity]" to Barbara Foley's Marxist interpretation of it as "ideological cover" (A. Bradley 2010, 179);<sup>15</sup> but despite assessments of this last section's political and even aesthetic failure,<sup>16</sup> it was the case that in 1950 Ellison's house-to-be was looking rickety. It was made up of "an 868-page manuscript with no conclusion" (178). How could, or would, it end? Bradley writes further an evaluation with which it is hard to disagree from the perspective we now have on Ellison's approach to writing:<sup>17</sup> "The narrative trajectory of his novel remained fluid until the very last moment. Were it not for his invention of the prologue and epilogue, as well as the several hundred pages he cut from the manuscript as it neared completion, one could imagine Ellison writing a boundless novel, with its protagonist in perpetual motion through a mounting series of incidents" (180). The very fluidity and boundlessness Bradley names, the quality of possible endlessness to Ellison's multiplying story incidents, necessitated outside compositional intercession to call a halt to the interminable building. The epilogue became, to use Bradley's felicitous language, a "capstone" (177) to close it off. From this perspective and in such a context, stuckness starts to look a lot like the compositional disinclination to stop generating smaller forms when what is wanted is the closure of a big one. When Ellison no longer wanted to put off sealing the manuscript, the company of excavators, including Hyman, intervened in the tinkering keeping him underground.

Ellison has often characterized *Invisible Man* as the narrator's memoir, seemingly by way of "proving" his character's final emergence. A book complete, the theory would hold, means the author has surfaced from his residency within the form. Of *Invisible Man* Ellison said with a tone of indisputability in 1972, "After all, that novel is a man's memoir. He gets out of there. The fact that you can read the narrator's memoirs means that he has come out of that hole" (1995b, 230).<sup>18</sup> All the same, critics debating the point effectively rejoin that there is nothing obvious about such an emergence. They seem to cry foul at applying principles of reality to fiction (*he must have come up; we have his book!*), especially to dodge an uncertainty created by the fiction itself. And Rice stubbornly writes, "Ellison speaks in these quotations of an event that never occurs in the novel. In actuality, the narrator never leaves the underground. . . . In the text of the novel he never separates himself from the underground" (2003, 12). As I hope I have shown, however, one does not need Rice's aggressive



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insistence, manifested in his triple “never” and his “in actuality,” to acknowledge that *Invisible Man* intriguingly offers in its very composition more burrow than emergence.

The form was, finally, complete. Still, within its borders the novel hints at the tendencies of its author and tale to keep accruing episodes in the style of the conjunction Deleuze and Guattari took under their philosophical wing and made the asyntactic wayfarer *and . . . and . . . and. . .*

## §

And, Ellison’s MO as writer and “tinker” seems to have been incompatible with long-term surface dwelling. Friends and publishing concerns made for an aboveground attitude and a finalized book in 1952, but the burrow *Invisible Man* instantiates was hardly thereby closed. Whatever emergence stood for that Ellison felt compelled to claim it for his narrator—action, relevance, commitment, or achievement, perhaps—Ellison’s singular way of occupying novelistic compositional space was anything but finished in the early 1950s. His next endeavor in his chosen genre to follow *Invisible Man* would take him over or, more aptly, take him under authorially. Ellison resubmerged in a form that would in many ways remain unbounded. In the pages ahead and *en route* to getting to this sizable manuscript, never published in its entirety or as a novel made by Ellison, I address what might seem a digression: Ellison the essay writer. Ellison as essayist has a lot to say about Ellison as novelist. I attend not only to the form to which I see Ellison as especially suited, namely the essay, but also to how his aptitude for this shorter form might bear both on his difficulty in formalizing *Invisible Man* and on his very long, unfinished manuscript for a second novel.

Biographer Arnold Rampersad remarks that even after having sent *Invisible Man* off to the publishers, Ellison “shared with Hyman . . . a concern about his reliance on . . . hapless ‘riffing’ instead of a tight plot” (2007, 309). Rampersad seems less than fond of Ellison in his life of the author.<sup>19</sup> Even so, and despite the former’s unfortunate choice of words in “hapless,” given Ellison’s remarkable talent, Ellison’s body of work confirms he was in many ways more comfortable, if not perhaps happier, working in small, riff-like forms. A brief excursion through Ellison’s bibliography confirms that shorter writings make up the bulk of his published material. Similarly, readers versed in his oeuvre will not be surprised to hear Ellison described as an adroit essayist.<sup>20</sup> In



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well-formed essay after essay he laid out his views on American culture, race, democracy, writing, jazz, and other arts. Essays like the previously unpublished but later collected "Harlem Is Nowhere" (1948), *Saturday Review's* "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz" (1962), or *The American Scholar's* "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1977–78)<sup>21</sup> remain indelibly with us as distinctly Ellisonian: stubbornness of vision, fluidity of tongue, and sharpness of insight dominate. One might cheekily cite *A Thousand Plateaus'* tribute to the Pink Panther, which "paints the world its color, pink on pink" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 11). Or, as Horace Porter puts it more routinely in praise of Ellison the essayist, "Whatever Ellison wrote about became Ellisonian" (2001, 69).

Ellison's acclaimed first book of essays, *Shadow and Act*, was published in 1964.<sup>22</sup> In 1986, his second collection, *Going to the Territory*, came out. (After Ellison's death, materials found contributed to the 1996 publication of *Flying Home and Other Stories* and emphasized again his strength in smaller forms—this time in short fiction.)<sup>23</sup> *The Collected Essays* gathered Ellison's interviews, speeches, and essays into one sizable, nearly nine-hundred-page volume in 1995. *Living with Music*, published in 2001, was a special compilation devoted to the author's jazz essays. Rice notes, "Though Ellison always spoke of himself as a novelist and not as a critic or even an essayist, the quality of his essays suggests that they were more than momentary preoccupations" (2003, 58). Of *Going to the Territory*, published more than thirty years into Ellison's drafting of his long-awaited second novel, novelist David Bradley wrote in a favorable review that "the essays . . . never fail to be elegantly written, beautifully composed and intellectually sophisticated. The personality that emerges from the pages is witty, literate, endearingly modest, delightfully puckish. So much so that, while one cannot completely forgive Ellison for not writing that novel we've all been waiting for, one does start to wonder if we have not been waiting for the wrong thing" (1986). In crediting Ellison's essayistic abilities, Bradley speculates on a point worth emphasizing: "One does start to wonder if we have not been waiting for the wrong thing." It might be impossible to say for sure whether, in anticipating a novel from an author who as time went on seemed only less artistically disposed to complete one, Ellison's audience had for decades mischosen their object of anticipation. Still, and regardless of what we ought to hope for from the author, it does seem the case that Ellison's skill in rendering his "elegantly written" essays bore an inverse relationship to the likelihood of his producing a second novel—not to mention this skill's bearing on his ordeal in conclusively composing his first success.



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Let me try to explain here why Ellison's essayistic inclination seems unlikely to have supported his finishing a novelistic successor to *Invisible Man* and might directly signify the obstacle to its realization. Most importantly, we have to consider just what the essay form allowed him. Doing so will also relatedly address how the Ellison essay stands in strong connection to the rhizomatic tendencies of which *Invisible Man* is an early exemplar in Ellison, tendencies that nearly kept that novel, to re-quote Adam Bradley, "in perpetual motion" and that, to recur to Ellison's words to John Hersey, "continued to be something of a problem" following its success. After all, it seems to be a gap in Ellison's reception that more has not been made of the tension between his clear ability in shorter forms and his great difficulty in making it novelistically or, more literally, in making the novel. While such a disparity is impossible not to note simply by looking at Ellison's publishing history, it has not been read back into his novelistic endeavors.

Ellison was a heavy drafter during the writing process, and his essays are no exception. By means of the Library of Congress's Ellison archive, Rice emphasizes the author's habit of revising his essays: "Many of the essays exist in draft after draft and many of the typed drafts themselves are heavily edited with pencil. Indeed, in many cases Ellison's papers show that he revised his essays as much as he did the episodes in *Invisible Man*" (2003, 84n8). Rice suggests that we should take Ellison's essays as seriously as his novel in understanding his themes and conceptual investments, and Ellison does seem to have handled the essays and episodes similarly or with equal artistic gravity, putting them through multiple revisions to hone their expression. But the essay form also allowed Ellison the possibility of continual accretion without the maintenance of a larger structure. Essays allowed him to keep writing something like episodes but episodes that did not ultimately have to share a roof; they were small pieces that could largely remain so without consequent compositional loss. Here was no requirement to build a house or, truer to Ellison's situation, muster a team of house-builders.

For Ellison, the essay seems to have supplied a particular kind of permissiveness withheld by novel writing. While the essay is certainly not without its focal exigencies, its smaller scope appears to have been more in keeping with Ellison's compositional habits. Significantly, one gets to keep writing in this short form, essaying ever new takes, not only by revising one essay but through writing multiple essays as well, essays that frequently return to an earlier theme and accumulate new understandings of it. In other words, for Ellison there seems to have been something of



the rhizome in generating the essay, “a short-term memory” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21), which means each piece can shoot off in its own direction. Each variant on an idea represented by diverse essays does not have to connect to any other. “The rhizome,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “operates by variation” and “expansion.” Few words could better describe the shape of Ellison’s essayistic history or, more broadly, the author’s most recurrent mode of writing, even when up against a novel’s publishing deadline.

Although the Ellison essays have been collected into titled volumes that bracket them between book covers, they offer something more mobile and akin to nomadism-in-thought: “acentered, nonhierarchic” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). We might style him Ellison the “acentered”: a Deleuzoguattarian compliment. Jerry Gafio Watts has talked about Ellison as “a master of ambivalence” whose fluid thought “make[s] it difficult for critics to reconstruct and criticize his arguments” (1994, 28). Poet Michael S. Harper lyricizes Ellison more simply but similarly: “The Big E. is still making up / complexity” (1980–81, 105). And Berndt Ostendorf writes that Ellison is “not a systematic thinker, certainly not one with a blueprint or program,” adding that “his meanings are therefore temporary and transient, or, in his own words, ‘experimental.’ His answers are of the yes-but sort, shot through with disclaimers and contradictions” (1986, 145–46). This Ellisonian tendency to *change it up* informs a short exchange in *Invisible Man* between the narrator and Peter Wheatstraw. When the narrator encounters him, Wheatstraw is wheeling carts of discarded blueprints for, among other things, “buildings and houses” (IM 175), many of which have never been constructed, their plans unrealized; these have been cast aside “to make place for the new plans” continually being generated. Wheatstraw opens this dialogue:

“Folks is always making plans and changing ’em.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, thinking of my letters, “but that’s a mistake. You have to stick to the plan.”

He looked at me, suddenly grave. “You kinda young, daddy-o,” he said.

The narrator’s defense of following the form as laid out merely strikes his interlocutor as “young.” The savvier, more experimental Wheatstraw knows the blueprint has to be changed up, memory kept on the “short” side. Ellison’s essays are replete with “transient” meanings, to repeat Ostendorf’s term, indications of changing understanding that argue Ellison found the essay hospitable precisely because each instantiation



could readily be left for another, makeshift housing for itinerant thought, not something rigidly occupied in perpetuity. *You kinda young, daddy-o.*

The striking variety of tone between the 1957 essay "Society, Morality and the Novel" and "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" intimates the mobility the essay's smaller, cellular enclosure offered Ellison. Both essays address the state of flux they perceive as constitutive of America, the liquidity of class lines and identities—but their mood and valuations are just "off" of a beat that could be called shared. "Society, Morality and the Novel" ends by emphasizing the "tragic side" of progress. "The evil," Ellison writes, "now stares out of bright sunlight. New groups will ceaselessly emerge, class lines will continue to waver, break and re-form" (1995a, 724). Ellison sounds a call for continuity, asking without a hint of the irony we sometimes catch from him, "How, in a word, do we affirm that which is stable in human life, beyond and despite all processes of social change?" "Little Man" also concentrates on "America's social mobility" (493) but appraises the "constantly changing" (495) American identity with appreciative recognition far from the programmatic sound of "stability." Although Ellison will speak of the "state of unease" (504) that its mobile condition gives rise to in the United States, his major chord is reserved for pride in the "American compulsion to improvise upon the given" (507) and "the mystery of American identity" (508). Taken jointly and in their variance, the essays comment upon the continuation of Ellison's thought, or Ellison's thought as continuing, in this instance, when it comes to framing a conclusion about the instability he saw constituting the country.

The essay form seems to have combined persistence and changeability in a way that made it ideal for the "thinker-tinker" (*IM* 7). In the essay, formal closure and the *keeping going* characterizing Ellison's approach to thought and composition could coexist as he produced his small forms treating what were usually a fairly consistent array of themes, including democracy, complexity, folkloric tradition, and ingenuity, among others, but with a perspective always not quite the same as before. Further, and most significantly here, the essay's very ideality seems to have suffused the near improbability of the novel's realization, with Ellison's propensity for producing small forms complicating his exit from the warren that his novels' drafts became. Like analytical geometry's asymptotic approach, his drafting process of fashioning increasing numbers of small, discrete story units was not the same as, or even necessarily in the service of, reaching novelistic closure.



*Invisible Man*'s burrow—if Ellison's construction team closed up its most extraneous ducts—betokened a more extensive style of habitation for the author, one that would defer vacating the form in favor of generating new, partial iterations. In such a mode of writing, the author occupies the "deep basement" (567) of subforms.

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Of course, no study of Ellison's tendencies as an author who cleaves to form in place of completing it would itself be complete without further consideration of the work that followed *Invisible Man* but which, unfinished, could not follow it as a novel. While friends helped to curb the sprawling tendencies of Ellison's inaugural and award-winning novel so that it was, in 1952, publishable,<sup>24</sup> the next project's novelistic intentions would take Ellison into the drafting process for over forty years and see no egress for the author.

The unfinished second novel is by now notorious among Ellison's public. And while this essay does not aim to cover fully the draft's literary history or impressive density of content and breadth of story (an endeavor worthy of a separate project), it is the case that Ellison's occupation of the manuscript that followed *Invisible Man*'s completion bears substantially on the burrowing and nomadic style of composition with which the present essay is concerned. I am more than partially inspired in making this point by Adam Bradley's recognition that what followed *Invisible Man* for Ellison was not simply "a sad decline"; "instead . . . Ellison's protracted period of composition of his second novel offers invaluable insights into the making of *Invisible Man* and the long trajectory of Ellison's novelistic career" (2010, 18). I will also suggest, however, that in considering Ellison's "novelistic career" with a wider frame than is sometimes typical,<sup>25</sup> we might gain insights extending past the archival understanding of Ellison's drafting process that Bradley chiefly emphasizes.

Coming to Ellison in such a fashion, we gain an unusual perspective on what it meant for him to inhabit the novel mid-formation. The novel's consideration by the literary art world usually requires a finished manuscript, but what if the author cannot or does not (want to) "envio[n] an escape from the Book" (Kurnick 2012, 157)? What if he extends its boundaries beyond any blueprint into a labyrinth of story enclosures that he works to keep building? Such a perspective takes us into the underground as the very space of the rhizomatic, of writing



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ongoing: “always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). The experience of John F. Callahan, the literary executor made responsible for the masses of draft material Ellison left behind at his death, supplies some sense of this second work’s scope. Faced with at least nineteen piled inches of printed manuscript,<sup>26</sup> when last measured twelve years earlier, and computer data files of comparable bulk—“3,000 pages in 469 files on eighty-three disks using three computers” (A. Bradley 2010, 22)—Callahan had to see what could be done. After all, Ellison had told Herbert Mitgang of the *New York Times* in 1982, “If I’m going to be remembered as a novelist, I’d better produce it soon” (quoted in Rampersad 2007, 532), with “it,” of course, being the second novel long awaited.<sup>27</sup>

Callahan undoubtedly wanted to help his friend by finding nothing less than the anticipated novel amid the accumulation. Or by finding that this material had more coherence than Fanny Ellison’s urgent question suggested: “Beginning, middle, and end. Does it have a beginning, middle, and end?” In “two long steel file cabinets” Callahan found “early manuscripts and drafts, clearly going back as far as the 1950s, arranged very much in the way [Ellison] had arranged the early drafts of *Invisible Man*” (Callahan and De Santis 2000, 605). And the shortest answer to Fanny Ellison’s question was probably, or should have been, no. Although Callahan selected from the pile what he published in 1999 as the approximately 350-page novel *Juneteenth* and described its storyline as the “finished, coherent narrative that was the heart of the saga” (606), his find principally argues his desire for something to publish for his dead friend. In trying to illustrate what he encountered following Ellison’s death, Callahan traces the lines of anything but a “finished, coherent narrative.” Instead, he speaks of Ellison’s considerable work toward the second novel as a “labyrinth of manuscripts” and as “this huge, sprawling, somewhat incoherent, unfinished saga of multiple narratives.” While Callahan badly hoped the labyrinthine warren of Ellison’s pages would reveal a book, his adjectives tell of what is both bigger and more vague: “sprawling, inchoate” (618). “The worst moments came,” Callahan says, “when I’d get lost in endless variations of a scene, and sensed Ralph second guessing himself over and over again instead of writing the unwritten transitions between scenes” (609).

Interested readers can find Ellison’s papers where they are held in the Library of Congress. They can read *Juneteenth*, that product of literary



friendship, or the much larger selection of pages from the unfinished manuscript published via Callahan and Adam Bradley's joint efforts in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . . They can meet the memorable characters Adam Sunraider and Bliss, Alonzo Hickman and Love New, and many others. Ellison's writing toward the novel he never completed has an extraordinary vitality, reach of story, and style unmatched by *Invisible Man*'s younger novelistic instantiation, its more *set* blueprint. Nonetheless, the "huge, sprawling, somewhat incoherent, unfinished saga of multiple narratives" Callahan describes has continued in its "sprawl" to be vulnerable to skepticism about just what Ellison had been making for more than forty years. As Rampersad writes in his typically caustic manner of this unending draft, "Was he writing a novel . . . ? Why did characters enter his work out of the blue, and mainly so [*sic*] to riff entertainingly rather than advance the plot? Where *was* the plot?" (2007, 310). Without greater connectivity to move reader and author and character between those misleadingly proximate points A, B, and C, the subterranean form Ellison left behind, but never as a writer left, seems only to have been identified aboveground and most positively put as an aspiration or a hope. Not a novel. (When *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . . was published, the library at the major university where I was completing my doctorate did not purchase a copy. The longest selection yet published of the unfinished manuscript of one of our most famous twentieth-century authors seems to have remained something of a black sheep in the Ellison canon.)<sup>28</sup>

Ellison's final engagement with the novel form remains unsettled, the editor who came after him "lost in endless variations of a scene." The "variation" and "expansion" Deleuze and Guattari describe as constitutive of the rhizome seem to have overtaken the composition of the novel-to-be and nomadically expanded the extent of the burrow bodied in *Invisible Man* past containment. In the second work, the subterranean site of *Invisible Man*'s hole does not recur as scene or habitation, yet we understand that this is in some ways because it has swallowed the ongoing manuscript whole to become its (and its author's) underground method of operation. After having surfaced to publish the 1952 success, Ellison would not again close the form of the novel: instead, indefinite occupation of a house beyond blueprint.

But all this sounds so grim.





In the year he died, 1994, Ralph Ellison said the following during an interview with journalist David Remnick. He was speaking of the unfinished manuscript so eagerly anticipated by his readers after *Invisible Man*'s quick entry into the literary canon, and so long delayed in its arrival: "Letting go of the book is difficult, because I'm so uncertain. I want it to be of quality. With *Invisible Man*, I wasn't all that certain, but I had friends like Stanley Edgar Hyman, who worked on *The New Yorker*, and who was invaluable to me. . . . When you are younger, you are so eager to be published, I am eager to publish this book" (Ellison 1995b, 395). I like to think that Ellison's last sentence above, transcribed with connective commas, comments upon the latency characterizing his relationship to the novel form. And more, that it does so in a way that offers us a glimpse of his mixed, eventually not wholly negative relationship to such latency.

"When you are younger," he says, "you are so eager to be published." The first clause suggests that the second alters with age. An older author becomes less gung-ho to finalize form for publication's sake. Something else,<sup>29</sup> maybe, overcomes this sensed importance. The first two clauses' use of the second person further distances them from the "I" of the older, ostensibly more knowing Ellison who appears in the third clause. This third clause, though, with its "I am eager to publish this book," makes the first two confusing. Additionally, while the first part of the larger quotation stipulates Ellison's creative doubt as the prime cause of publishing delay, the last sentence undoes our certainty about Ellison's uncertainty in the strangeness of its logic or, rather, in its lack of syntactic logic. At first you are eager to publish. *But not so much now*, he seems by implication to say. Then: I am eager to publish. The linguistic composition internally trips its own momentum, as if Ellison's very statement *about* publishing enacted his complicated relationship to completing the work *for* publishing. "The Big E," Harper writes, "is still making up / complexity," dwelling in the middle of meaning.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1940s and early '50s, Ellison placed his anonymous narrator in a hole. It is, as critics of *Invisible Man* have suggested, a hole whose occupation can be understood to represent political withdrawal or, conversely, a period of dormancy promising or leading to further action. It is a hole, as Thomas Heise has argued, that also conceivably and more concretely attests to the underground living situation of "tens of thousands of African Americans" (2011, 131) circa World War II; in



Harlem alone, “39 percent [of cellars] were in use as homes” (133).<sup>31</sup> What I hope to have demonstrated, however, is that the Ellisonian hole also speaks volumes about what arguably most insistently interested *Invisible Man*’s author: simply put, writing.<sup>32</sup> His relationship to writing would mean that Ellison only ever published one novel. We might never know what to call *the second thing*, the very long “*intermezzo*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25) he rhizomatically composed, though its richness undeniably rewards our attention. The pages Ellison produced toward a second novel also pose a valuable challenge to our modes of cataloguing and coming to literature and to a distinction between archive and work of art.<sup>33</sup>

In closing the present form, though, let me advance an answer to the question with which I began. What does it mean to be down a hole? Perhaps we might understand such residency to mean one is negotiating the form, still. Working to *get it together* but all the while finding new pieces to “toss around” that challenge compositional cohesion and obstruct an exit. How we, as readers or writers, feel about or interpret this negotiation will vary. Belowground no blueprint has been irrevocably rendered. *Invisible Man*’s narrator says he’s “coming out,” “shaking off the old skin” (*IM* 581) to emerge; but he’s heard Peter Wheatstraw and he’s not so *young* anymore. Nothing’s been determined for sure or ever shall be on this front, occasional critical desire aside.<sup>34</sup> *Invisible Man*, finally, offers by means of its hole a test of its whole and gives us a singular look at a novel secured on the verge of incompleteness. And Ellison’s novel, as we know, now stands distinguished in its genre and century.

But just on the other side of that edge, Ellison’s underground writing style intimates the lure of ongoing writing. Subsurface occupation entails risk—there’s no denying that. Deleuze and Guattari might call such hazard a “catastrophic black hole,”<sup>35</sup> while in the publishing world it means a no-go. Yet here, as Ellison knew, there is room to play.

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Cheryl Alison received her doctorate from Tufts University in 2014 and teaches writing at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts. Her essay on the interpretive challenge of Ralph Ellison’s archives has appeared in *European Journal of American Studies*. Her current book project focuses on Ellison, Francis Bacon, Samuel Beckett, and Elizabeth Bishop, and explores forms of enclosure in transatlantic late modernism.



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## Notes

1. *Invisible Man* will be cited as *IM*.
2. Requests for greater nuance have appeared over the last forty years for this reason, generating an increasingly familiar refrain (see Ostendorf 1986, 145; Neal [1970] 1987, 105; Cornel West's assessment on the back cover of Watts 1994; Porter 2001, 6; and Posnock 2005, 2). The "tussle" has been as much over author interpretation as over Ellison's one finished novel, with sympathetic critics sometimes assuming a defensive position. See Parrish 2012. Timothy Parrish tries to set the record straight, particularly in reaction to Rampersad's 2007 biography, which represents Ellison as essentially a social climber (Parrish 2012, ix–xiv). Regrettably, Parrish's version of a fairer view nearly canonizes Ellison as a martyr (215).
3. Rice writes, for instance, "It is hard not to attach these seemingly incomplete political gestures to Ellison himself, in particular his incomplete novel"; "If we consider active involvement in politics to be synonymous with visibility or emerging from the underground, then we must assume that Ellison, like his narrator, never becomes fully visible" (2003, 4, 52).
4. On the subterranean situation as inefficacy, see Walcott 1972, 14; Cooke 1984, 107–9; Jacobs 2001, 197–99; Rampersad 2007, 246; and Foley 2010, 328. See also Rice 2003 (Rice repeatedly argues that Ellison, like his narrator, is politically "stuck"). On (potential) efficacy, see Morel 2004, 6; Scott 2004; Spaulding 2004, 485, 493, 497–98; Rankine 2006, 89, 142; Wright 2006, 22, 85, 100, 129; and Parrish 2012, 28.
5. Edward Pavlič and Valerie Smith offer slightly more dimensional approaches. Pavlič's metaphors of the "above-ground" and "underground" (2002, 139) still judge the narrator's final location less than desirable but allow Pavlič to offer a more dialectical take on these positions and what they offer or limit than is common in Ellison criticism. Smith's attention to autobiographical form as strategy, if it repeats the move I identify, does not assume the conversation's sometimes anti-literary tone (see Smith 2004, 218).



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6. The student wants to know "*whether [the narrator] found himself or not*" (Ellison 1995a, 537). Ellison interprets the question to mean that surfacing is at issue. Adam Bradley notes Ellison's habit of trying to control *Invisible Man's* reception (2010, 185).
7. Such exchanges are numerous in the history of Ellison's reception (see, for example, Ellison 1995b, 76, 85).
8. Ellison's words are apropos: "I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle" (1995a, 182).
9. Albeit with a different focus, Berndt Ostendorf also notes the importance of "and" in Ellison. Ostendorf is particularly interested in thinking through the contraries that Ellison enjoyed dialogically and dialectically joining with "and" (1986, 151).
10. Ellison's novelistic influences are frequently mentioned, not least by him and his biographers. And Eric Sundquist includes the following list: "Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner" (1995, 7).
11. As Flann O'Brien writes, "A good road will have . . . a certain air of destiny, an indefinable intimation that it is going somewhere, be it east or west" ([1967] 1993, 40).
12. See Jackson 2002, 298, 414.
13. Adam Bradley notes Ellison's increasing isolation (2010, 7). See also Rampersad 2007, 538.
14. Dickens writes, "Where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages" ([1852-53] 2003, 80).
15. Bradley continues: "to protect [Ellison] from those who might question his political allegiance in an atmosphere of red-baiting" (A. Bradley 2010, 179).
16. Anthony West describes the epilogue and prologue as "intolerably arty" sections that "can easily be skipped, and they should be" (1952, 93). He calls these novelistic bookends the novel's "two worst pieces of writing" (96).
17. This is thanks in no small part to Bradley's extensive work with John F. Callahan in the Ellison archives held at the Library of Congress.
18. See also Ellison 1995a, 537 and 1995b, 203.
19. David Denby (2012) also notes this. See, too, Parrish 2012, ix.



20. John Wright points out that “when Modern Library’s 1998 panel of scholars and critics created dual lists of the twentieth century’s greatest one hundred English-language novels and greatest one hundred works of nonfiction, Ralph Ellison stood in equipoised singularity, four years after his death, as the only writer to appear on both lists” (2006, 11).
21. See Ellison 1995a, 320–27, 256–65, 489–519.
22. Wright reminds us that Ellison’s reading public was not always unified. By the time of *Shadow and Act*’s 1964 publication, Ellison was becoming unpopular among African Americans. Black Power was on the rise; “The ‘blackness’ of [Ellison’s] fictive vision became more and more suspect; and the black press essentially ignored *Shadow and Act* save for a few superficial or condemnatory notices” (2006, 17). *Going to the Territory*, by contrast, “garnered wide attention now from . . . the black literary world” (212). In the 1980s, a new cultural and political scene had taken over.
23. Rampersad would disagree but does not to my knowledge have much company. The biographer sees him as unimpressive in the genre (see Rampersad 2007, 252–53, 483–84).
24. *Invisible Man* won the 1953 National Book Award for Fiction.
25. Lawrence Jackson (2002), for instance, closes his Ellison biography with *Invisible Man*’s 1952 publication. And Parrish points out that Rampersad principally conveys “what Ellison had not achieved and had not written” after 1952 (2012, ix).
26. See Rampersad 2007, 532.
27. Exemplifying the national attention the novel’s delay received, *Playboy* magazine had its ear to the ground. The magazine sent its “Senior Staff Writer, Walter Lowe, Jr.,” to ask after Ellison’s progress in 1982, thirty years after *Invisible Man*’s publication (Ellison 1995b, 383).
28. As Parrish writes, “In the immediate wake of its appearance, one could search the archives of the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New Republic* and find nothing of substance about *Three Days*” (2014, 92–93).
29. Parrish’s essay seems to suggest this “something else” is, essentially, faithfulness to and contest with lived and living, ongoing history.
30. Relatedly, Ellison’s literary interpreters have conceptually mobilized “improvisation.” For examples of criticism in this vein, see Porter 2001, 76, 85; Sundquist 2005, 222, where improvisation is a figure for Ellison’s creative ongoingness; Yaffe 2006, 73, 197; Borshuk 2006, 91–120; Muyumba 2009; and Bradley 2010, 17, 179, 190. Allied with the jazz form by which he was



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greatly influenced, improvisation is also Ellison's metaphor when he writes about taking cultural and political givens and *playing the changes* upon them. Ellison similarly makes figural use of "improvisation" in his 1981 Introduction to *Invisible Man*, apropos of the writing process (IM xxiii). He conceived of improvisation as a national talent and "compulsion." See, for instance, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1995a, 507). See also Ellison 1995b, 336, where Ellison discusses the special location of African Americans in relation to improvisation. But while Ellison's critical and creative proximity to its language might make improvisation the obvious conceptual choice for this essay on ongoing composition, I have mostly shied away from such a metaphor because that "key" has been played often. In emphasizing (and admiring) jazz's less notated, traditionally more adaptable and quotation-filled form, this critical move has become, ironically and broadly put, predictable. I have preferred to rely on a different set of figures to develop the conversation in a new direction and, hopefully, add to its dimension.

31. Heise is quoting the May, 1952 newsletter of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of New York.

32. Ellison repeatedly emphasized his primary role as writer. In 1955, he said, "I wasn't, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art" (1995a, 211) and, in 1966, "I am a novelist, not an activist" (1995b, 101).

33. One senses Parrish's difficulty, for instance, in proposing our best approach to the work whose multi-directionality he justly celebrates. Initially suggesting a "digital" presentation (2014, 95), he ends his essay clearly struggling to define what it would mean to have "completely published" the work, though this is precisely what he calls for:

Until Ellison's other novel has been completely published and read in its multiple forms, we can say that he is still writing it, even in death. Every version of the Hickman-Bliss saga, specifically the drafts from the 1950s, should be published, probably in separate volumes, and read as related versions of a story still unfolding. As many of Ellison's notes for the novel as possible should be incorporated into the various episodes, especially since they seem to contradict each other just as the incidents in the novel sometimes do. (116)

Parrish's language implicitly teases our sense of what "completely" means in the case of Ellison's novel draft. Is it everything or "as many . . . as possible"?

34. Calling the narrator's emergence "incipient," Thomas Schaub's unusually nuanced argument sees its incomplete status as a means of "emphasiz[ing] the border between chaos and order as the complex territory of human ambiguity" (1988, 151). While Schaub seems to belong to the pro-political



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efficacy camp in his reading of the ending, his suggestion that it effectively “keeps the novel in motion” is particularly appealing. Once again, though, the interpreter seems eager to close down this motion; Schaub compares the narrator’s “incipient emergence” to “Thoreau leaving Walden,” that is, to a historically completed exit.

35. Deleuze and Guattari posit the “black hole” as one risk of deterritorialization (1987, 334; see also 350).

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## Reviews

*In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation*, by David Sherman. Oxford University Press, 2014. 273 pages.

*Paul K. Saint-Amour*

What is the power of a corpse to make the room that contains it strange? What ethical losses do we incur when we're seldom if ever in rooms with the dead? And how might the virtual spaces of the aesthetic give quarter to the strangeness of the corpse's demand? Luminous and serious in treating these questions, David Sherman's *In a Strange Room* looks at how Anglophone modernism responded to a shift in the late-modern way of death: from a time when most people died at home and were prepared by family members for burial nearby, to a time (still our own) when most people died in hospitals and were prepared, after autopsy, by professionals for burial farther from home. This shift roughly corresponded with the rise of statistics and the actuarial sciences, the birth of the insurance industry, and the waning of the church's monopoly on dying, death, and mourning rites. Above all it produced a crisis in what Sherman calls "mortal obligation," the question of what kinds of attention and attendance, over and above considerations of law and capital, the living owe to the remains of the dead. In pre-industrial societies, religion and the cultural practices emanating from it would have answered this question. But by the secularizing early twentieth century, the dead and dying had become symbolically impoverished. Modernists, says Sherman, attempted to find an idiom in which to express this impoverishment without capitulating to it—to think mortal obligation in forms that neither relied on evacuated religious paradigms nor acceded to the instrumentalizing energies of the technologized and professionalized way of death. At stake was nothing less than the symbolic integrity of culture as a continuum between the living and the dead, nothing less than the capacity to continue recognizing humanity (from Latin, *humare*, "to bury") as distinct from other beings insofar as we bury our dead.

Another kind of writer would have insisted that modernism did not simply "reflect" or "respond to" a discrete, antecedent historical change but was caught dynamically and reflexively in it. But instead of



warding off the reflection theory of culture, Sherman does something more surprising: he embraces the reflective temporality of belatedness to consider what specifically it affords to literature. The corpse in the early twentieth century, he argues, had become the bearer of contradictions between the religious meanings that still attached to it and its resignification by a more bureaucratized and commodified way of death. Coming *after* this resignification, modernism could attempt, if not to resolve that contradiction, then at least to materialize it anew in art. This is to make modernism itself a survivor confronting the strange remains of earlier cultural moments and crises. It places the literary critic, too, within the ambit of mortal obligation to the *literary* remains of the dead. Sherman meets this obligation by modeling in his close readings the sort of proximity and non-instrumentalizing gentleness he sees as having once been entailed on the living in their obligations to the deceased. He meets it as well by binding complex stories and arguments into apt but patient aphorisms. A few highlights from the book's magisterial introduction will show you what I mean while also recapitulating some of its core claims. "The dead are a task by which the living give their freedom a sense that it is worth struggling for" (6). "Corpses, unable to say what they need from us, are nevertheless eloquent in their need" (7). "The modernized dead were financially expensive but ritually cheap" (8). "Because in modernity every corpse is always already to some degree abandoned, on the verge of public meaninglessness, the ethical task, according to the modernist imagination, is to devise something like its symbolic refuge" (36-37).

Three chapters follow the introduction to Sherman's book, each one pairing modernist authors who ruminate on mortal obligation under shared conditions and shaping pressures—respectively, war, temporality, and eros. Chapter 1 offers readings of Wilfred Owen's war poetry and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) linked by Giorgio Agamben's notion of thanatopolitics (i.e., biopolitics in a state of exception) and a discussion of the problems of representing soldiers' corpses in wartime battlefield painting. The formal emphasis here is on synecdoche, the part-for-whole trope by which the postwar British government made a single unidentified soldier's remains stand in for unrepatriated multitudes of war dead buried overseas. Against what Sherman considers this "triumph of an instrumental totalization as a political structure" (85), Owen and Woolf variously interrupted the synecdoche's premise of smooth scalability, overwrote the trope through the substitutive movements of metaphor, and narratively reengineered it to the ends of mortal obligation. In



discussing *Jacob's Room*, Sherman wonderfully substantiates Karen Smythe's suggestion that the Woolf narrator, in her capacity as the novel's empty center, is a kind of secret sharer with the cenotaph (etymologically, an "empty tomb") to the war dead, an Unknown Subject who functions, too, as a narratorial analogue to the Unknown Warrior.

The second chapter, in my estimation the book's most compelling, uses the polysemous phrase "burial plot" to organize a discussion of narrative punctuality and delay in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and the "Hades" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Sherman reads the "I" of Faulkner's title as implicitly plural, both because the living are always "becoming-corpses" themselves and because dying, death, and burial are necessarily communal if they are to bear any significance at all. The chapter's analysis of "Hades" is strong but did not prepare me for the compelling final Joyce section on the intimate relation between lives concluded and lives unled—between the dead and the counterfactual. Here Sherman argues that Joyce draws the dead alongside the could-have-lived because "the genuinely modern dead are the unfinished task of the living to actualize, to make real" (130). In other words, until the living find adequate ways to realize and resymbolize modern death, it will be as if the dead merely could-have-lived. Proceeding by way of a fresh constellation of passages strewn throughout *Ulysses*, Sherman gives us a way, finally, to connect that work's counterfactual energies to its profound engagement with tradition, mortality, and memory.

"The Erotics of Mortal Obligation," chapter 3, pays welcome attention to the undersung connection between Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot, dwelling on how *Nightwood* rejects *The Waste Land's* attempted repatriation of the dead. Barnes's novel is handled with particular vividness; in Sherman's reading it can be seen to affiliate mortal obligation in an age of modernized death with queerness both as a nonnormative subjectivity and as an absolute entanglement of death and dying with eros. The book's finely dialectical coda establishes two poems, William Carlos Williams's "Tract" (1916) and Wallace Stevens's "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (1947), as opposing terminals through which the current of modernist mortal obligation runs. Whereas Stevens conjures the social unworlding of the dead and an end to mortal obligation, Williams imagines the loss of the old death rituals as clearing a symbolic space that might host new conjugations of the dead and the living. Although the latter position is closer to Sherman's own, he refrains from declaring that modernism might choose univocally to embrace mortal obligation over its loss. *In a Strange*



*Room* holds out no prospect of reenchantment without attrition, no claim that heeding mortal obligation is indeed obligatory, or even possible.

It's no accident that necessary-impossible nodes such as these call poststructuralist ethics to mind. Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and others are frequent interlocutors here. But if poststructuralist ethics and modernist aesthetics are the topsoil of Sherman's study, one might say its ground is anthropological. This is apparent in its references to lifeworlds, to deathways and death practices, to ritual and passage and liminality. It's even more apparent in Sherman's commitment to certain fundamental understandings of who humans are and what they do. "Humans tend to each other's corpses; humans signify," he writes, reminding us by way of Robert Harrison that *sema*, the Greek word for "sign," also meant "grave." Sherman is rightly wary of idealizing premodern deathways or universalizing their loss, devoting a section of his introduction to the historical particulars of the book's Anglo-American context. But where the rise of the quantitative social sciences, the burial industries, and the secularization of death are part of this historical narrative, the emergence of modern anthropology is not. This absence is especially surprising given anthropology's institutional coemergence with the canonical Anglophone modernism with which *In a Strange Room* is centrally engaged. As I read, I wondered how Sherman's story would have altered had the work and institutional uptake of Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Bronislaw Malinowski been inside its historical frame rather than grounding it from its discursive endnotes—or if it had been in dialogue with the work of Marc Manganaro (1990, 2009) and others on modernism and anthropology.

Sherman's study cites and seems to embrace Giambattista Vico's view that burial is what sets humans apart from beasts—that it must be maintained "so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness" (quoted in Sherman 16). I have no argument with a wish to protect human corpses from both abandonment and total commodification. But it's worth asking whether that wish must be premised on a human exceptionalism that implicitly abandons the nonhuman animal, both alive and dead, to an utterly instrumentalized being. "Dead meat trade," thinks Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* (1986, 81), remembering killing day in the livestock trade he used to ply. For Sherman, Bloom's words index the "brute, beastly fact of death in its submission to the logic of quantification" and "an idea of a corpse's value



that does not require the ritual passing of time to manifest” (118). Yet humans are as capable of interring and mourning animal corpses as they are of abandoning human corpses unburied. And death practices—vigils, mourning, even versions of burial—have been observed in a range of nonhuman animals. Recently cultural anthropologists have begun to practice multispecies ethnography, decentering their own declaratively anthropocentric discipline by reimagining, in Anna Tsing’s words, “human nature [as] an interspecies relationship” (2012, 144). *In a Strange Room* ends by insisting that we need our mortal obligation to the dead “to remain plausibly human,” and that modernism comes bearing this news. But nonhuman animals and our relations with them bear countervailing news: that mortal obligation may not be exclusive to *homo sapiens*, may inhere within and between multiple species. How, one wonders, might modernism help us to a sense of mortal obligation grounded in something other than or nonexclusive to humanity?

For its part, the term “modernism” is a less insistently theorized one in Sherman’s study than one might expect. For some readers this may come as a relief given how compulsory long definitional excurses on the term have become in scholarship in the field. But because it’s so quietly theorized, modernism as invoked here sometimes has difficulty containing the large claims made on its behalf. “What modernist writing has to offer that is most unique and consequential,” says Sherman, “are concepts of mortal obligation, concepts that depend on the possibility of hearing in a modern idiom the tautological command of corpses in a world that instrumentalizes them” (24). This is a powerful provocation, but it leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Is the claim made only about the book’s Anglo-American example-set or about a more populous transnational and multilingual modernism? Is the strong link between modernism and mortal obligation intended to deny the status of modernism to works that don’t address rapidly changing death practices or simply to identify one among many strains of modernism? What’s more, the book registers the current state of the field of modernist studies only intermittently, perhaps in part because of its significant commitments to philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies. I found myself wanting to see what Sherman might have made, in chapter 1, of Vincent Sherry (2003) on Liberal war discourse, Mark Wollaeger (2008) on modernism and propaganda, and Ravit Reichman (2009) on the cenotaph and traumatic inheritance—or, in chapters 2 and 3, of Heather Love (2007) and others on queer temporalities.



My wish, though, to see *In a Strange Room* amplify its field-investments and tarry with more interlocutors is at root a mark of my appreciation and admiration for Sherman's book, whose best arguments and evidence are so suggestive that it's hard not to want to see how they ramify for all the writers, works, and problems one cares about. My quarrels with the project are eclipsed by two invaluable things it has taught me. First, that mortal obligation invites us to think of death not (only) as the termination of a social relation but (also) as the inception of one. And second, that the loss of that relation through the modern outsourcing, professionalization, and commodification of death practices threatens a second-order death, the death of death. Such a loss threatens truly to kill the dead as bearers of social being and reciprocity—to subject them, in Sherman's words, to “the social death that had previously been reserved for the most unfortunate among the living” (36).

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Paul K. Saint-Amour is professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* and *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. With Jessica Berman he coedits the Modernist Latitudes book series for Columbia University Press.

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*Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience*, by Charles Altieri. Cornell University Press, 2015. 262 pages.

### John Gibson

This is an ambitious book. Its goal is to offer a reenchantment of the notion of literary experience, and it does so by attempting to bring in line with modern critical and theoretical sensibilities lost ideas from Kant, Hegel, and Schiller. This is a book that tries to wipe the idealism from German Idealism yet retain its basic aesthetic commitments, and it does so by looking to the poetry of Yeats and, surprisingly, John Ashbery to elaborate its central philosophical messages. Just as surprisingly, *Reckoning with the Imagination* uses the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein as an organizing principle, finding in his philosophy of mind and language a set of ideas and anxieties that aid Altieri in navigating this expansive and unusual terrain. If this seems an unlikely concatenation of philosophers and poets, it somehow works. *Reckoning with the Imagination* is at the very least a unique and creative work. It is certainly idiosyncratic and challenging. But it is also exhilarating, frequently brilliant, and full of gifts critical, philosophical, and aesthetic. It is the kind of book that at moments makes one feel like cheering.

Why Wittgenstein? For Altieri, Wittgenstein functions not only as a fresh source of philosophical theory about the nature of expression but also as a potential site of rapprochement and inheritance. Rapprochement because Altieri wants to find ground on which the concerns of both the contemporary (Anglophone) literary critic and philosopher can meet and be put in fruitful conversation; and inheritance because he wishes to rescue, after substantial tinkering, a number of terms that contemporary literary theory has largely tossed aside, terms essentially concerned with the axiological and phenomenological dimensions of reading poetry: the language of value, experience, and imaginative absorption. Altieri sees in the strand of high analytic philosophy that culminates in the work of the later Wittgenstein—the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*—possibilities for keeping these broadly romantic concepts near yet reinterpreting them such that they can sit comfortably with modernist tastes.



Making this work is no easy feat. The habits of mind that characterize literary scholars and philosophers in the UK and North America are *very* different, even if they share an interest in many of the same epistemic and linguistic problems and paradoxes. The relationship between the two is, depending on the room, one of intense hostility or practiced indifference, and Altieri rightly takes this state of affairs to be unfortunate. Vulgar and uncharitable accounts of this hostility are familiar enough. To the literary scholar, analytic philosophy, which dominates philosophy departments in the Anglophone world, can seem to have missed not only the 1960s but the Holocaust, industrialization and, essentially, the entire rise of modernity, pursuing its projects in a timeless conceptual space that renders it constitutionally incapable of making sense of artifacts that are inherently and explicitly responsive to historical conditions, for instance, all music, literature and art. Literary theory, the philosophical prejudice might go, takes great interest in uninteresting and unthinking forms of relativism, cynicism, and skepticism, and it often evinces an awkwardly uncritical relationship to the very critical theory it celebrates, citing Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida in a register of hagiography, however much this conflicts with the express message of their works. Both characterizations are silly, but they are common nonetheless.

One way of understanding the promise Wittgenstein holds for philosophers and literary theorists who wish to be friends is that his work—with its early concern with nonsense and the ineffable and its later turn to the rough ground of ordinary language and the project of de-psychologizing meaning, expression, and intentionality—can function as a bridge between the interests of both parties to the not-so-ancient quarrel. “My Wittgenstein,” Altieri tells us, “understands better than any other philosopher how to frame the limits of discourse without resorting to any kind of skepticism” (viii). Pithy though it may be, this sentence is remarkably informative. It gestures toward what Altieri thinks Wittgenstein can offer literary theory and to why he sees him as offering the philosopher and the literary scholar a common ground (“anti-skepticism” is effectively a synecdoche for the general commitments of the philosopher; “the limits of discourse” for those of the literary theorist). Other literary theorists and philosophers have turned to Wittgenstein for these reasons: Richard Eldridge, Garry Hagberg, Marjorie Perloff, R. M. Berry, Robert Chodat, Michael LeMahieu, Wolfgang Huemer,



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Sarah Beckwith, Jami Bartlett, and, recently, Toril Moi come to mind. But Altieri has been part of the game since the beginning, and this book offers his most impassioned case for the relevance and unifying power of Wittgenstein's thought.

*Reckoning with the Imagination* develops its arguments over the course of seven chapters whose titles give a very good sense of the content. To give a sampling of its provocations, "Where Doubt Has No Purchase: The Role of Display," "What Literary Theory Can Learn from Wittgenstein's Silence about Ethics," and, straightforwardly, "Appreciating Appreciation" are all stand-out discussions. Throughout the book, Altieri turns to Yeat's "Leda and the Swan" and Ashbery's "Instruction Manual" for their romantic and postromantic views of the imagination—they turn out to be largely compatible—as well as their ability to incite the particular kind of philosophizing about art that Altieri's book advocates. Each chapter effectively functions to reanimate an item in the broadly German-Romantic aesthetic lexicon Altieri favors: terms like *sympathy*, *attunement*, *imagination*, *value*, *appreciation*, *affect*, and *the sensual* abound, and they are enlisted in a sustained rebuke of instrumentalizing theories of literature that make the acquisition of knowledge and ethical insight paramount.

Altieri is also unafraid of authors, and his theory wishes to show us how to treat poems as created objects that are shot through with purposiveness and so can call forth specific forms of appreciation. His account of this is not reactionary. For Altieri, it is not that the poets breathe "meanings" into their work that become the central objects of readerly attention, though some of that may happen. Nor do authorial intentions matter much, apart from the extent to which they are "displayed," that is, "when the author signs the works," the point of which is not to endow them with a privileged meaning set on high by authorial consciousness but rather "to indicate that there has been a carefulness in making decisions that stage responsibility toward what the audience might expect of a work of art" (35). The poet creates a context for a kind of *participatory* and irreducibly imaginative mode of engagement, the goal of which is not to conquer the poem in understanding but to make possible a distinct form of affective experience. Indeed, for Altieri "getting" an artwork is more an affective than cognitive accomplishment, and it is for this reason that he can get away with claiming that his is a properly *aesthetic* theory of poetic appreciation. The felt dimension of poetic experience, not the conceptual dimension of cognitive understanding,



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is the whole point of it. Consider his claim that in reading poetry, and perhaps the whole of imaginative literature, “we enact what I call a process of valuation. We try to participate in how texts engage our affective lives. We come to treasure what we see as achievements in the text—in maintaining our interests, in cleverly manipulating the actions, in directing our interests to fresh perceptions or sensitive formulation of attitudes” (12-13).

For Altieri a poem is a place in which central features of the self are articulated, explored, and amplified. The acts of writing and reading poetry offer the self a form of imaginative exploration of the possibilities of personhood, possibilities that culminate in newly realized or deepened forms of attunement with oneself, others, and the world: “Most significant works of art promise only to mobilize and thicken experience so that the world becomes a more vital place for habitation, making the self feel itself an adequate locus of responsiveness to what the world can offer” (106). The reward for engaging in this self-fashioning is a fundamentally aesthetic realignment with those features of our subjective, social, and cultural conditions that a poem calls on us to participate in, even in the act of imitatively engaging with its form and matter. Valuing, in Altieri’s model, is the name for this form of engaged, imaginative participation, a process whereby the self “can attune to what is at stake in imagined situations” (180-81), which, of course, implies attunement with those aspects of human experience that these “imagined situations” bring to our affective attention. Wittgenstein’s work on avowals and “change of aspect” (quoted in Altieri 71) turns out to be key to developing the expressive and imaginative dimensions of this theory, and Hegel’s is used for showing how to historicize it and, thus, how to acknowledge the essentially social nature of poets’ and readers’ participation in the practices that underwrite these acts of self-articulation.

It is worth making a point on behalf of Altieri, one that may prove promising for those who work on theories of subject formation or in the philosophy of the self. The point isn’t quite Altieri’s, but his book strikes me as demonstrating it nonetheless. It is common now to think of selves not as things but as achievements. Since at least Ricoeur a popular, but fraught, way of seeing the nature of this achievement looks to the theory of narrative for a model of how we constitute a sense of being a particular person burdened with a particular life. As the saying goes, we are storied creatures. The narrative view of the self is, in many respects, a



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fundamentally novelistic conception of selfhood, finding in the way the writer of fiction constitutes characters and makes sense of their lives a key for how we can do much the same—though presumably with less aesthetic and artistic success. And a common worry about narrative views of selfhood is that they ascribe entirely too much cohesion, meaning, and order to selves. Human selves, unlike fictional characters, simply do not hang together so neatly, coherently, and meaningfully. Nonetheless, the question remains: What does the achievement of selfhood consist in, and how might works of art guide our thinking about it? One of the most arresting features of Altieri's book is that it effectively outlines a poetic model of selfhood, one that points up a very attractive alternative to the novelistic view. In the poet's expressive activity, not the novelist's narrative labor, we are offered a glimpse into the structure of how we articulate a sense of self and give substance to basic features of personhood. And we do so in a way that avoids imputing too much order, cohesion, and meaning to the self. There is much promise in the idea, and Altieri is to be credited for bringing it to the attention of the philosopher of the self.

*Reckoning with the Imagination* is a fascinating work. Philosophically inclined readers who wonder what poems might have to tell us about the nature of selves, sociality, expression, and imagination won't want to live without it. If it is at times a challenge to read, it is a genuine pleasure to reflect on.

## §

John Gibson is director of the Commonwealth Center for Humanities and professor of philosophy at the University of Louisville. He is the author of *Fiction and the Weave of Life* and is currently writing a book titled *Poetry, Metaphor and Nonsense: An Essay on Meaning* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).



*The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form*, by Audrey Wasser. Fordham University Press, 2016. 216 pages.

Matthew Gannon

In his call for artists to “make it new,” Ezra Pound voiced the imperative that seemingly all art in the modern era is subject to, particularly modernist art. Artworks are accordingly understood and judged in light of expectations of newness, expectations containing unexamined metaphysical assumptions and other received ideas about what art is or should be. Such assumptions are the critical focus of Audrey Wasser’s recent book *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form*. Starting from this question of newness, Wasser investigates the ontological status of literature while “aiming to disrupt the metaphysical assumptions of romanticism—namely, the assumptions of what counts as the unity and integrity of any object, and how causation as such is determined” (6). Eschewing the post-Kantian romantic paradigm that dominates ontological criticism, she develops a theory of literary production informed by Gilbert Simondon, Pierre Macherey, and Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze is particularly central to Wasser’s argument that literature is essentially self-differentiating. His theory of differential repetitions helps her explain how novelty can be generated if literature is thought of as “a complexity-producing machine” (7) offering up new linguistic combinations and rhetorical possibilities that might reorganize ways of thinking and being.

Wasser pinpoints the foundational articulation of the new not in modernism, as one might expect from Pound’s appeal, but in German romanticism. It was during the romantic period that the idea of literature as the creation of the new came to prominence. This way of thinking, argues Wasser, still dominates approaches to literature, despite a lingering paradox embedded in this conception of the new: “If, on the one hand, the truly new work must break with its existing context, then, on the other hand, it must still be recognizable in some fashion, and be recognizable as art” (2). The problem of the new is thus one of managing opposing and irreconcilable terms that the romantics inherited from their idealist forebears, particularly the conflict between a structure and its genesis or a form and its formation. This “indissoluble metaphysical tension” (37) located in the literary work could only be transcended by the romantic idea of literature as “an organic totality” (36), an absolute whole naturally formed from autonomous fragments. But because



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this conception of literature implies that a new work simply exists *sui generis*, having ostensibly been created *ex nihilo*, it can only account for the existence of the new, not the production of the new. Wasser's aim is to offer a distinctly nonromantic theory of literature that can address its ontological status as well as its conditions of production in a given literary, social, and historical context.

After a discussion of romanticism that provides the historical and critical context for her thesis, Wasser's argument unfolds through a consideration of three different theoretical perspectives (Cleanth Brooks, Maurice Blanchot, and Gilles Deleuze) and a reading of three key modernist authors (Samuel Beckett, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein). The latter three chapters identify rhetorical figures operating in select works: "epanorthosis" in Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*; "hyperbole" in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*; and "tautology" in Stein's *The Making of Americans*. The focus on rhetorical figures suggests a deconstructionist approach, though Wasser carefully delineates both her indebtedness to and departure from that tradition. Whereas deconstruction often reads rhetorically in order to highlight negativity and aporia, her approach stresses how these rhetorical figures are generative of narrative, affects, and subjects. She argues for "an ontology of difference" in literature, which she defines as "an ontological investigation that privileges repetition over reflection, difference over being, and differential relations over those of identity and negation" (6). Difference is what lends literary works their productivity, and Wasser rejects the notion of literary works as self-sufficient or internally coherent and instead focuses on the way in which literature is characterized by "moments of blindness, excess, contradiction, retraction, and repetition" (8). Because literature's being is predicated on differential relations rather than any stable identity, its ontology is fundamentally a question of its production, and the guiding question behind Wasser's inquiry, inspired by Deleuze, is not what a work of literature means but rather how it works (9).

According to Wasser, many of the irreconcilable oppositions that characterize literature today are due to the fact that literature can be thought of as either aesthetic or intellectual, a process or a product, a creation or a technique (16). She traces these tensions back to the Jena romantics, particularly August and Friedrich Schlegel and their *Athenaeum* journal (1798–1800), and post-Kantian German idealists like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. German romanticism elevated literature even beyond philosophy itself, hoping that new literary forms, such as the novel, could achieve an aesthetic universality, thereby resolving a number



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of philosophical problems, particularly the conflict between freedom and necessity. The hope was that the duality of subject and object could, in an aesthetic work, be transcended in an absolute subject-object, an organic totality self-conscious of its own genesis, a form reflecting on its own production.

This romantic project ultimately failed to address the literary paradoxes it sought to overcome. In positing literature as the solution to philosophical problems, Wasser claims, "romanticism burdens literature with a philosophical task it cannot—and should not be asked to—shoulder" (37). Instead of recognizing this failure and circumventing it, numerous twentieth-century theorists foundered on the same conflicts. She discusses Cleanth Brooks and Maurice Blanchot as representative of this tendency, both trying to account for the existence of literature in what was ultimately a flawed romantic critical paradigm. For whatever else that separates Brooks from Blanchot, writes Wasser, "Each attempts to account for literary creation, either through an implicit reinstatement of authorial intention, in Brooks's case, or in a theory of inspiration and sacrifice, in the case of Blanchot. But each does so by following . . . a movement that leads each critic backward from already-given works in his attempt to think the origin of those works" (5). New Criticism aimed to repress the contingency of the work's production by positing a unity of intention and form, conflating the two through a circular reasoning that makes the work's existence dependent on necessity and teleology. The work itself, under such circumstances, "can only spring into being fully formed, the spontaneous source of its own sufficient reason" (50). Wasser's characterization of New Criticism puts it in relation to Blanchot, whose theory of literary creation posits a radical break with the origins of the creative process, distancing process from product and defining the latter as essentially the negation of the former. In pitting the autonomy of the artwork against its genesis, Blanchot's favoring of the former is decidedly in accordance with the romantic conception of literature. But if a work can only be truly new by being divorced from its conditions of production, the new becomes paradoxically impossible. Blanchot's conception of the work of art thus implies creation *ex nihilo* (see Wasser 67, 75), and his theoretical perspective on the new, like Brooks's, "ultimately remains unable to address the question of the work's passage from possibility to realization" (53).

In contrast to the theories of literature advanced by German romanticism and inherited by the likes of Brooks and Blanchot, Wasser advances her own model of the new based on literary production and difference. In the book's central chapter, Wasser proposes "a Deleuzean



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ontology of the literary object" (74), which she derives not from Deleuze's writings on literature but from the ontological investigations of his magnum opus *Difference and Repetition* (1968), as well as the works of Henri Bergson and Gilbert Simondon. Wasser develops five theses on literature that address how a work can be new when it is produced in an existing context of literary tradition or language use: 1) literary production is conditioned by problems, 2) literary production is a differentiating and individuating process, 3) a produced work remains relative to the problems it articulates, 4) a work is distinct from the process that gives rise to it, and 5) literary criticism is conditioned by problems (see Wasser 74). The term *problem* that is so central to her theses is here meant in the Deleuzian sense in which a problem is not negated by its solution, but coexists with it. The work of art can be understood as a solution in a problematic field, a field that includes literary history, social conditions, and institutional practices. "Literary production," summarizes Wasser, "entails the production of the new from within an immanent field of differences" (84). While the work, then, is a response to this field, it remains immanent to it through a process of differentiation and individuation rather than negation or cancellation.

Though Wasser maintains that the work is differentiated from the milieu that preceded it, she stresses that its ontology is relational to the milieu in which it is produced, neither claiming complete autonomy nor becoming subservient through heteronomy. The work is instead *heterogenetic*, which means that the work is an "open system" and "the site of an active negotiation and exchange" between it and its environment (84). Conceived of as a multiplicity, the work is not reducible to its context or even itself: "The work already differs in itself, exists as something essentially constituted by self-difference" (93). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, she argues that literature is best thought of as a machine, assemblage, or apparatus that produces and organizes different meanings, affects, and events. Thinking of literature in this way also reconciles the autonomous text with its extratextual dimensions, as an assemblage is composed of "a battery of variables individuated from multiple fields simultaneously: linguistic, material, social, territorial, emotional, evental" (91).

The ontology of difference that Wasser works out in the theoretical portion of her book makes possible her close readings in the final three chapters. In each chapter, she identifies a rhetorical figure that generates the work's difference and repetition, focusing on what a given text does rather than what it means. Chapter 5 offers up a reading of Beckett that goes



against the grain of traditional criticism, which reads *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* as consumed by negativity. Wasser resists treating these texts in terms of such an aesthetics of failure according to which Beckett successfully demonstrates the impoverishment of language and literature, a reading that becomes mired in an abyssal problem: "Is this a narrative about the difficulty of telling stories, or about the difficulty of telling about the difficulty of telling stories? (Repeat question ad infinitum.)" (104). She instead articulates an aesthetics of difference through a reading that "would suspend the question of what Beckett's text says about itself by means of its figures, in favor of an examination of the way it has of saying and the means by which it constructs these figures" (109). The key rhetorical figure Beckett employs in producing a self-differentiating work is *epanorthosis*, a form of repetition in which clauses are restated but modified as the narrative constantly rewrites itself, as in the famous stuttering formulation from the end of *The Unnamable*: "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (96). The power of *epanorthosis*, Wasser argues, is that it organizes seemingly incompatible assertions and generates meaning and emotion for the reader.

Wasser identifies a similar effect in Proust's use of *hyperbole* in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust's seven-volume novel is rife with "figures of exaggeration and verbal abundance" (118). Hyperbole, the rhetorical figure of excess *par excellence*, generates a difference between what a text says and what it does. Certain conspicuous descriptions in the novel seem overelaborate or excessive at first because they are part of a "belated discourse" and point "toward a future moment in which its meaning will be manifest" (123). Wasser yokes this insight to the novel's conception of the self, in which changing emotional states throughout the narrative precipitate an unfolding of multiple and differentiating selves. The novel's model of the self and its narrative structure itself are generated through a rhetoric of difference and repetition.

Rhetorical repetition in literature is even clearer in Stein, who is famous for phrases like "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." In her reading of *The Making of Americans*, Wasser highlights Stein's use of *tautology*, a rhetorical figure often derided as "both an aesthetic failing—a lack of novelty—and an epistemological failing—an empty claim" (143). Tautology in Stein's hands, however, emphasizes repeated habits and patterns of behavior and democratically refuses the subordination of clauses, creating equality among parts in a whole. In its tautological repetition, Wasser finds that *The Making of Americans* generates networks that are "prismatic, kaleidoscopic, refracted" (153), qualities that may not



make the novel new in the sense of a rupture, but do make Stein's work, quite significantly, something different.

Linking together Wasser's discussion of Beckett, Proust, and Stein is the question of the self and the subject. The narrators and narratives of these modernist texts are not self-identical, they are not fixed with a stable coherence but are instead characterized by internal fissures and self-differentiations generated through formal, rhetorical devices. That this might provide insight into modernism's social, political, and historical imagination is one of the more provocative implications of *The Work of Difference*, and a more explicit discussion of these possible dimensions of a literary ontology of difference would have been illuminating. Wasser occasionally stresses how forms of literature coincide with forms of subjectivity (see, for example, 99, 161). Her emphasis on differences, multiplicities, and assemblages interestingly points neither to individualism nor to simple collectivism as modernism's favored form of subjectivity, instead suggesting possibilities for something like a post-individualism or transindividualism that possesses a political potency.

Despite the gestures toward the social and political organizations implied in literary form, *The Work of Difference* rightfully ends with a call for contemporary literary studies to refrain from jumping too quickly from the more abstract questions of language and form to some "extratextual real" that is perceived as more concrete and therefore worthy of attention (160). Such approaches uncritically "leave untouched the metaphysics of form that underlies these practices" (161), and in seeking to go beyond questions of literary form they instead fall short of them. If questions of social and political configurations are to be addressed, if we are to "overcome the limitations of the romantic subject," as Wasser suggests we should, we need to stay true to questions of literary form and language. Only through this critical pathway can we come to an understanding of the artwork as "a site where a different articulation of being is possible." Wasser's book, then, stands as a testament to the current relevance of rethinking modernism and the new along the lines of a literary ontology of difference and offers a renewed understanding of form that challenges romantic conceptions of literature and subjectivity.

## §

Matthew Gannon is a doctoral student in English at Boston College. He works on British and American modernist fiction, poetry, and film through the lens of critical theory and continental philosophy. His current research investigates the politics of aesthetics at the theoretical intersection of Marxism and psychoanalysis.



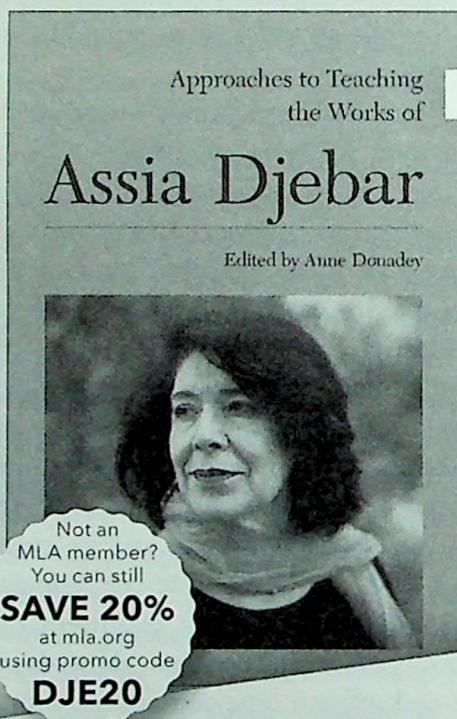
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# Introduction

*Heather Cass White and Fiona Green*

The impetus for this special issue on Marianne Moore was the March 2015 “21st Century Moore” conference at the University of Houston. The theme of that conference, at which forty-one scholars and poets from across Europe and America presented, was the future of Marianne Moore studies in the new century. Two of the conference organizers, Elizabeth Gregory and Stacy Hubbard, have edited a forthcoming book of essays by a selection of the presenters, *Twenty-First Century Marianne Moore: Essays from a Critical Renaissance*. We, Heather White and Fiona Green, were the other two organizers and wanted to use the momentum from the conference to pay tribute to *Twentieth-Century Literature’s* particular role in supporting the scholarship that brought new energy and rigor to Moore studies just over thirty years ago and became our own first encounter with the world of Moore criticism. That world has changed significantly in the intervening decades, as new critical methodologies have come into play, the canon of Moore’s work has itself expanded significantly, and the advent of the internet has transformed our access to formerly recondite material.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, many of the questions that motivated *TCL’s* early work remain as pressing as they ever were, as the contributions to this present issue will show.

In 1984 *TCL* devoted its Summer and Fall numbers to a special “Marianne Moore Issue.” Andrew Kappel, then deputy editor of the journal, guest-edited it. In 1984 Kappel was thirty-three and at the beginning of a shift in the focus of his scholarship from Ezra Pound (the subject of his 1978 dissertation and three published essays) to Marianne Moore. Eight years later, in December of 1992, he died of AIDS-related complications. His work in Moore studies during those years, including the special issue he edited and the lengthy introduction he wrote for it, influenced the scholarly generation that followed his and suggests how much Moore studies lost when he died. Between 1990 and 1994 he



published five essays on Moore, three of which appeared posthumously, each of which continues to be cited today.<sup>2</sup> His subjects were Moore's readings in religion, and her work's textual history, two poles whose magnetic force in Moore studies has only increased in the decades that followed.

*TCL's* Marianne Moore issue, which Kappel edited years before most of his own writing on Moore saw print, was itself a major contribution to Moore scholarship. Kappel assembled a group of writers, including Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, Margaret Holley, Taffy Martin, and John Slatin, whose books became part of the core of modern Moore scholarship. Although they were writers of markedly different interests and angles of approach, what they had in common was a will to move Moore scholarship away from readings of the poems as "demonstrations of their author's personal virtues" (Kappel 1984, xix). Kappel argued that the critical tendency toward "domesticating admiration" of Moore's work, while tacitly encouraged by Moore's own shrewd management of her public persona, left crucial gaps in our understanding of her achievement:

Compared with the vast and sophisticated scholarly and critical literature devoted to her great contemporaries, work on Moore seems almost negligible. . . . Many of the things we like to know about our poets, we simply do not know about Moore. For instance, we know very little about her place in the tradition of American and British literature; we have only the crudest sense of the shape of her career; we do not have a tradition of competing interpretations of her poems, nor any well-developed sense of which poems are greatest, which lesser. (xxii)

In 1984, as Kappel and his generation of Moore readers set out to separate Moore's poems from her personality, they had timing on their side. Although Kappel begins his introduction to the Moore issue by noting that "'stories about the first time I met Moore' . . . dominate the historical record of the poet's life" (v), he was himself too young to have any such stories, or any vivid memories of Moore's late-in-life fame. That lack was an advantage, permitting him and the generation of readers he was a part of the freedom to read the work afresh. Twelve years after her death in 1972, Moore's writing was well on its way to becoming a body of work with a life independent of the physical life of its author. Kappel and his cohort were thus the right group to address the more abstract, scholarly questions about tradition, textuality, and evaluation his introduction raises.



They also had a powerful new lens through which to read Moore: the archive of her papers at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. Moore's papers arrived at the Rosenbach in 1969. Patricia Willis was the first, and for a number of years the only, visitor to a collection consisting of a lifetime's worth of papers (letters, notes, calendars, etc.) gathered in shopping bags and cartons, several thousand books, drawers full of household objects, and more (see Willis 1990, 16). Willis's work there remains the foundation of contemporary Moore scholarship. She was the first to read through the material in its massive entirety and to begin to organize it in such a way that other scholars could make use of it. Such a trove of primary material would enrich the study of any poet, but as Willis herself rightly argued, Moore's "rock-like poems," composed so insistently of strata of cultural referents of all kinds, languished during the New Critical era, awaiting critics "interested in the history of the text and the poem's place in its historical context" (Willis 1990, 15) and with access to an archive to support those interests. The contributors to Kappel's 1984 issue made use of the archive in ways that still resonate: tracing the development of Moore's thought by consulting draft material for poems, arguing for readings of her intent by investigating the sources from which she quotes, and investigating lesser-known versions of well-known poems.

Shortly after the issue's publication archival material became more widely available, allowing us to know about Moore some of Kappel's "things we like to know" about a major poet: in 1986 Willis published the now indispensable *Complete Prose*, and in 1997 Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, and Cristanne Miller edited Moore's *Selected Letters*. Five years later Robin Schulze's facsimile edition of Moore's early poetry, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002), began to establish a precise history of publication and revision that had been erased by the misleadingly titled *Complete Poems* (1967; rev. 1981). Heather White's editions of Moore's poetry in the 1930s (*A-Quiver with Significance* [2008] and *Adversity and Grace* [2012]) extended that history. Linda Leavell's 2013 authorized biography, *Holding on Upside Down*, is the most recent addition to this body of archival scholarship, and the one that has brought Moore's life and writing to the attention of the widest public. And the future looks bright: by the time this issue is in print White's edition of Moore's collected poetry, *New Collected Poems*, will have been published, and the Marianne Moore Digital Archive, which aims to provide annotated transcriptions of all of Moore's more than one hundred and twenty notebooks, will be live at [moorearchive.org](http://moorearchive.org).



The response to Moore in 1984 was motivated in part by the need to separate the poetry from the person, the body (so to speak) from the corpus. Since then, Moore's particular historical moment has come, with passing time, to seem ever more complex. With conceptions of modernism reworked and contested, critical practice has generated multiple ways of resituating Moore's verse. The historicist turn in literary studies has had a particular impact on work in this period, with a variety of institutions, technologies, and media coming under as much scrutiny as its poetry, fiction, and drama. Much attention has focused, for example, on the production and circulation of experimental writing in early twentieth-century coteries and little magazines and on the later absorption of the avant-garde into midcentury institutions and commodity cultures. Marianne Moore sets a fine project for criticism on both these scores: her early poems were published in the most influential little magazines, and she exerted considerable influence herself as the editor, from 1925 to 1929, of one particular institution of modernism, *The Dial*. *Becoming Marianne Moore*, as well as White's subsequent facsimile-based editions, have brought into focus Moore's importance to this milieu, as well as its importance to her developing poetics. The access to Moore's habits of publication and revision enabled by these editions has its counterpart in a new set of queries and obligations for Moore scholars: as White puts it in her essay in this issue, "At present it is still not standard critical practice to identify the version of a poem one is reading or to consider earlier versions as a matter of course." Such accuracy about the textual record, a concern of each of the essays in this volume, contributes to the still-ongoing work of refining what Kappel called our "crude" sense of the shape of her career.

Moore's career is a case study also for the mid-twentieth century assimilation of avant-garde experiment into the mainstream, because of the public persona she cultivated in later life. On Kappel's query over "which [Moore] poems are greatest, which lesser," the consensus of his generation was that Moore's strength lay in the poetry of the twenties and thirties; there was, in the twentieth century, general agreement that the poetry declines in quality in parallel with Moore's rise to public notice and popular acclaim, the downturn coinciding with World War II. John Slatin put it strongly in 1986:

[Moore's] sense of history virtually collapses with the outbreak of the Second World War, to be replaced by a deepening, simplifying



nostalgia for a world and a self gone beyond all hope of recovery, and the proud, critical intelligence takes to itself a shield of humility. . . . Nostalgia and humility combine forces to simplify not only Moore's vision of America and her own relation to it, but her poems as well. And it is just at this point that she becomes a popular poet and an estimable public character. (209–10)

Since 2000, significant critical attention has turned to the cultural contexts of Moore's celebrity, along with calls for a revaluation of the late work, so that the shape of her career remains open to scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> The five essays collected in this special issue focus closely on the period Slatin and others have identified as a turning point for Moore: the poems and essays she published between 1935 and 1944. The recent editions of *The Pangolin and Other Verse* and *What Are Years* account in part for this focus, but there are particular aspects of Moore's career in this crucial decade that also compel attention. Like other poets of her generation, Moore turned her mind more fully to national and world events in the 1930s; with this came the explicitly ethical emphasis in her writing discussed in the first and last essays in this issue, by Heather White and David Herd, respectively. Like these two, the other articles make their larger claims—about criticism, about revision, about verse form, about performance, about politics—by means of detailed case study. Morton Zabel's question "But where was 'Pigeons'?" is the starting point for White's essay about a poem that did not survive Moore's brutal mode of self-revision and about the two strands of Moore criticism that have consolidated in the last twenty years, one of which has attended to the poet's knowledge of natural science, the other to her learning in Protestant theology. These two come together, argues White, in the lost "Pigeons," a poem that, once we have recovered it, teaches us to read Moore into the twenty-first century. Christina Pugh also addresses recent tendencies in the criticism through the lens of a single poem. Her essay on Moore's revisions of "Half Deity" argues that the poem moves, with the larger trajectory of Moore's oeuvre, toward a more autonomous lyric mode and so pushes back against recent claims for the "indeterminacy" of this habitual reviser's corpus. Fiona Green's essay is about the book in which "Half Deity" appeared, *The Pangolin and Other Verse*. Its concern is Moore's return, in the 1930s, to syllabics and her correspondence in the same period with Ezra Pound. Green argues that Moore's thinking about history in the mid-1930s diverges from Pound's partly because of the differing modes of attention they bring to their prose source material.



Edward Allen identifies a new form of mediation and a new kind of revision in Moore's sound archive. His reading of "Spenser's Ireland" brings out the illocutionary force of a recording Moore made at Harvard immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This marks the beginning of Moore's career as media strategist, responsive to historical circumstance, schooled in public speaking, and finding yet another opportunity for revision in the reading scripts she annotated for her vocal performances. David Herd's essay brings the issue full circle to further discussion of "ethical Moore" and centers, like Allen's article, on a live performance, the 1943 *Entretiens de Pontigny* where Moore delivered her lecture "Feeling and Precision." By examining its public occasion Herd finds in Moore's essay an ethics that reaches both backward and forward in her work, whereby she engages more fully with mid-twentieth-century philosophical discourse than has yet been recognized. The bearer of moral force in Moore's later work, which repositions her poems of the 1950s and 1960s in relation to postwar poetics, argues Herd, is not the technique of collage or cut-up but the mastery of detail.

In his introduction to *Selected Poems*, one of the earliest and most consequential evaluations of Moore, T. S. Eliot is careful to praise "the genuineness" of her work without presuming to evaluate its "greatness" (1935, 5). "Greatness," he writes, is a historical quality, and "we cannot tell, in advance, what any poetry is going to do, how it will operate on later generations." Implicit in his caution is the idea that one measure of poetry's greatness is its continued capacity to act on future generations at all. Most literature is forgotten; some becomes fossilized; and some part, very small, continues to answer the needs and expectations of future generations of readers. Kappel's 1984 introduction was pervaded by his sense of urgency: so much work, he argued, of such foundational importance, remained to be done before we could properly measure Moore's achievement. It is telling that all the work that has been done since that time has served not to sate our curiosity about Moore but to sharpen it. In 2017 we, the editors of the present special issue, are no less sure than was Kappel that many of the really vital questions about Moore's work—the essays collected here focus in particular on its ethical force, its verbal texture, and its philosophical and historical resonances—remain enticingly open and offer grounds for new speculation. It is a testament to Moore's poetry that those who come after us will likely feel the same. Evidence is accumulating that her work is both genuine and great.



## Notes

1. The introduction to *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore* (Leavell, Miller, and Sculze 2005) remains an excellent guide to the impact on Moore studies of feminist, queer, history of science, globalist, and ecocritical theories.

2. See Kappel 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b.

3. Of the items listed in Elizabeth Gregory's "Bibliography in Progress" of Moore scholarship since 2000 (2017), more than a dozen focus on the late work.

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# “Pigeons” and the Future of Moore Criticism

Heather Cass White

The differences described in the last chapter between the eleven chief domestic races [of pigeon] and between individual birds of the same race, would be of little significance, if they had not all descended from a single wild stock. The question of their origin is therefore of fundamental importance, and must be discussed at considerable length.

—Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*

Thus you may see what advantages to a heavenly life every condition and creature doth afford us, if we had but hearts to apprehend and approve them. . . . And as they have taught their pigeons, which they call carriers, in divers places, to bear letters of intercourse from friend to friend, at very great distance, so might a wise, industrious Christian get his thoughts carried to heaven, and receive, as it were returns from thence again by creatures of slower wing than doves, by the assistance of the Spirit, the Dove of God. This is the right Dedalian flight; and thus we may take from each bird a feather, and make us wings, and fly to Christ.

—Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*.

But where was “Pigeons?”

—Morton Dauwen Zabel, Letter to Marianne Moore,

Morton Zabel, then associate editor of *Poetry* magazine, asked his plaintive question of Marianne Moore in a letter congratulating her on the publication of *The Pangolin and Other Verse* in the spring of 1936. *Pangolin* was Moore's follow-up to *Selected Poems* (1935) and her first collection of all new work since *Observations* in 1924. The poems she finally decided to include in *Pangolin*, especially “Virginia Britannia” and “The Pangolin,” became as definitive of her work in the thirties as were the “animiles” Eliot placed first in *Selected Poems*. *Pangolin* was a major artistic statement, continuing to demonstrate Moore's extraordinary creative strength in the years that followed her hiatus from poetry writing between 1925 and 1929. Until late into the production process the book included “Pigeons”;



Moore then changed her mind and asked that it be removed.<sup>1</sup> And that, for “Pigeons,” was that. Moore did not include it in any subsequent collection, so for many decades it was simply lost to her readers.

As a result, eighty years later Zabel’s question still resonates. Why did “Pigeons” disappear for so long? Where is “Pigeons” now in our reading of Moore, and where should it be? In brief my answer will be: front and center. I will argue this is so because the absence of “Pigeons” (along with several other poems) warps our understanding of Moore in the 1930s in crucial ways. That warping can be seen most clearly when we look at the way “Pigeons” unites two of the major directions in which Moore criticism has proceeded in the last twenty years. One such direction has followed her reading in the natural sciences and proposed that it became a model for her own poetics. The second has investigated her reading of Protestant theology and described its influence on her hope to create, in her poems, an ethical relationship between the poet and the world that is her subject.<sup>2</sup> While both of these approaches are indispensable to our understanding of Moore’s aims and practices, each is so far limited by not reading Moore’s work of the thirties in full. Moreover, read through the prism of “Pigeons,” it becomes clear they illuminate two sides of a finally single project that reached its apogee in that decade: Moore’s pursuit of an aesthetically and ethically tenable “original” poetics.

## Why did “Pigeons” disappear?

It was not for any lack of enthusiasm on her peers’ part that Moore suppressed “Pigeons.” The poem’s fraught textual history begins with unambiguous acclaim: *Poetry* published it as the first poem in its annual “Prize-Award Number” of 1935. That placement was a mark of the warm relationship between Zabel and Moore, and the newly warm relationship between Moore and *Poetry* generally, in the 1930s. Under Harriet Monroe’s editorship in the teens and twenties *Poetry* had been inhospitable to Moore; in 1922 Monroe went so far as to convene a symposium on Moore’s work that was, in Robin Schulze’s memorable phrase, “more like a roast” (2002, 26). Things were different in the thirties. Of the eighteen poems Moore published during that time, eight appeared in *Poetry*, and five of those were featured in the magazine’s prize-award numbers.<sup>3</sup> “Pigeons,” then, was part of a triumphal four years for Moore: having established her poetic reputation in *Observations*, and her cultural clout by editing *The Dial*, Moore returned to poetry publication with the enthusiastic support of the elite publishing venue of her time.



Moore was not guided by her peers' opinions, however, when she decided what to do with that work later in her career. Although "Pigeons" was a singularly thorough casualty of the period, its disappearance was part of a broader redaction to which she subjected her eighteen poems of the 1930s: seven underwent substantial revisions, and five did not appear in any form in *Collected Poems* (1951).<sup>4</sup> Thus, while "Pigeons" exemplified the particular virtues of her poetry at that time, it also suffered more than most from her ambivalence about those virtues.

After sixty-eight years out of print the poem's brush with extinction began to reverse course in 2003, when Grace Schulman reprinted it in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*. This reappearance would have been cause for celebration but for a catastrophic lapse in proofreading: Schulman's edition reprinted only just over half of the poem. The paperback edition of 2005 corrected this error by reprinting the poem in full. Three years later, I published a facsimile of its original appearance in *Poetry* in my 2008 edition of Moore's work in the 1930s, *A-Quiver with Significance*. It appears again in my edition of Moore's collected work, *New Collected Poems* (2017). However, being back in print is not the same thing as being fully integrated into the Moore canon. To use a Darwin-inflected metaphor, the difficulties facing "Pigeons," as well as other recovered poems like the 1932 version of "The Student," "See in the Midst of Fair Leaves," and "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks," are those that attend any reintroduced species: survival in the wild depends on a gene pool sufficiently hardy for propagation and the ability of the species to find and occupy a sustainable ecological niche. In the case of poetry, the gene pool corresponds to a reliable textual record, and the ecological niche to our overall understanding of the direction and significance of the poet's work as it evolved over time. The former is finally coalescing for "Pigeons"; the latter is my concern here.

## Why does its disappearance matter?

The present state of scholarship on Moore's work in the thirties shows clearly how consequential editorial decisions are in determining later lines of research. In the aggregate, we scholars have been willing to follow Moore's implicit instructions about what to consider and what to disregard with respect to her work. By and large we have written about the poems she reprinted in *Complete Poems* (1967) and its 1981 update, in the versions she created for that volume, and treated what she left out as extracanonical material of interest to specialists but dispensable in our



consideration of the whole.<sup>5</sup> As a result, our collective sense of Moore's interests and ambitions during a notably productive and lauded mature decade is skewed. In one sense it is skewed in that decade's favor: Eliot's decision (which Moore approved) to begin *Selected Poems* with Moore's most recent work, and Moore's later decisions to begin *Collected Poems* and *Complete Poems* with *Selected Poems* rather than *Observations*, has reinforced the somewhat mistaken idea that long poems about animals are Moore's most characteristic mode. However, the fact that those poems to which we have been so strongly directed to attend are actually only a selection of what she published during that decade, and in a number of cases deeply revised versions of even that selection, means that often we have not really studied the period as much as a facsimile of it, created by a much-altered Moore long after the fact. Charles Berger, in an essay that is itself an elegant corrective to this situation, notes the effect Moore's editorial choices have had on our understanding of the political dimension of her poetry:

It remains true that scholar/critics of modern American poetry, unless they have a special interest in Moore, tend not to think of her as someone who wrote "thirties" poetry. . . . Moore, for whatever reason, did not manage her career with the aim of bringing about, by book publication, a conspicuous coincidence between her figurative meditations on scarcity, oppression, nationalism, race, identity, and the "low, dishonest decade" of the thirties, as Auden put it. (2005, 151)

I would go further and say that even those of us with that special interest have only just begun to see Moore's work of the 1930s whole. A few (perhaps crude) numbers suggest the problem. There is one published article on "Pigeons," two on "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks," and one on the original 1932 version of "The Student."<sup>6</sup> No book has yet considered any of these poems (again, prizewinners all, and among her longest and most complex) at length, let alone considered how they may alter our view of the period in which they were written.<sup>7</sup> As far as I know no one has yet written on "See in the Midst of Fair Leaves," Moore's only sonnet. In 1964 Bernard Engel summarized the poems Moore published between *Selected Poems* and *Collected Poems* but did not collect in the latter:

Since she has not reprinted them, we may assume that Miss Moore does not wish them to be considered representative. Four of them appeared in the middle and late 1930s. These include "Half Deity" (1935), a long poem on insects that has many fine passages; "Pigeons" (1935), a somewhat playful



treatment of the homing pigeon; "See in the Midst of Fair Leaves" (1936), a contrast between the swan and angel, which represent beauty, and man who in his selfishness is often an "arrow turned inward"; and "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks" (1936), a long but unified poem using a description of a walk in the country to comment on decorum and craftsmanship. All four need minor revisions to make their intentions or their syntax clear; with such revision, all four would be worth preserving. (1964, 117)

While few Moore readers would now agree with Engel's reductive readings ("Half Deity" is about insects only in the sense that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is about pottery), we have, more than fifty years later, mostly followed his advice about "preserving" the poems without taking them as "representative." I don't mean to suggest that there has been a collective dereliction of duty; given the relatively short length of time these poems have been in print such a gap in the scholarship is to be expected. However, in light of the material that is now available, rectifying the mismatch between the significance of Moore's lost poems of the thirties and the paucity of scholarship on them is pressing and exciting business.

## What does Moore scholarship look like now?

I will contribute to that work here by outlining the way I see "Pigeons" as bringing together the two strains of Moore criticism I identified in the introduction to this essay, which I will call the scientific Moore and the Protestant Moore. Each of these schools of criticism has been informed by the general trend toward research in the Moore archives and close scrutiny of her source materials, and each has many more contributors and complexities that I can present here. To speak schematically, research into the scientific Moore centers on Moore's prodigious reading in the natural sciences and the manifold ways it shaped her poetics. In 2000 David Kadlec argued that Moore's reading of the debates about eugenics in the teens and twenties "showed Moore that the very contingency that determines the generational transmission of life-forms might serve as an enriching and constitutive force in language itself" (2000, 158). Fiona Green, in 2005, read Moore's engagement with those same debates as the foundation for Moore's vision of a national poetics in "An Octopus": "The poem's setting in the Mount Rainier National Park suggests Moore's engagement with the discourses of national vigor that the parks



were designed in part to promote. However, the poem's emphasis on diversity counters conceptions of American racial purity, the eugenicist polemics that frequently accompanied calls to reinvigorate the American race" (2005, 137). Most recently, and most comprehensively, Robin Schulze's *The Degenerate Muse* (2013) details Moore's poetic responses to debates surrounding modern art and its potential effects on the American national character in the early twentieth century. Schulze shows Moore to have been writing, in the teens and twenties, under a broadly felt cultural pressure to counter the "degenerative" effects of overrefined, European art, as well as in the shadow of the eugenicist immigration policies Kadlec and Green outline. Schulze shows the specific pressure Harriet Monroe, in her influential role as editor of *Poetry*, put on poets to heed the widespread belief that the best way to counter "the potential decay of the American nation and the decline of its unique [white] racial stock, the degeneration that followed in the wake of over civilization" (2013, 12) was to incite its (white, affluent) citizens to go "Back to Nature" (Monroe quoted in Schulze 2013, 2).

Schulze argues that Moore's poetry of plants and animals should be understood as her solution to the question of how poetry could aid cultural health. Her Darwinian answer was a poetics that demonstrated "the problematic link between domestication and degeneration and . . . the need for creatures of all kinds, animal and vegetable, to resist the forces that would rob them of their wildness" (Schulze, 178). Moore's poetry of the 1920s, Schulze contends, advocates for "a new sort of verse [that] would let . . . creatures and their actions speak for themselves. It would stick closer to the facts of their experience and go back to nature without heading through it in the name of upward comparisons between matter and spirit" (173–74). "Moore rejects the notion," Schulze concludes, "that a poem is in any way the product of some divine special creation above and beyond the mundane life of nature" (176).

While work on the scientific Moore has followed closely her reading in natural history, scholars of the Protestant Moore have focused on her equally deep reading of theologians of what Elisa New's seminal study *The Line's Eye* (1998) calls the "other" Protestant ethic. New defines that ethic as:

a powerful, normative, and, further, highly durable understanding of a calling that exerted influence on American writers well into this century. The subject hearkening to such calling will be schooled against autonomous operations. Such a subject will be, in fact, unlikely to look for redemption in the cutting of an "individual"



figure. . . This other Protestant ethic is not a summons to individual advancement but an invitation to adhesive attachment and connectedness. It requires work, but abjures works. (1998, 243)

Andrew Kappel had previously demonstrated the central importance to Moore of seventeenth-century Scottish divine Richard Baxter's *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, from which she quotes extensively in "Marriage" and "An Octopus," among other poems. Moore found in it, Kappel argues, "a literary style of notable vividness" (1992, 421) and "an eloquence put in service of passionate belief" (424). Baxter's central teaching is that the state of blessedness is properly called Rest: "Rest is the end and perfection of motion. The saint's rest here in question is the most happy estate of a Christian, having obtained the end of his course: or, it is the perfect, endless fruition of God, by the perfected saints, according to the measure of their capacity, to which their souls arrive at death; and both soul and body most fully, after the resurrection and final judgment" (1962, 29). Notably for Moore, Baxter's vision of Rest involves earthly work and striving, but of a particular kind. The seeker after the Saints' Rest must engage in

such motion as is rightly ordered and directed towards the end; not all motion, labour, seeking, that brings to rest. Every way leads not to this end; but he whose goodness hath appointed the end, hath in his wisdom, and by his sovereign authority appointed the way. Our own invented ways may seem to us more wise, comely, equal, pleasant: but that is the best key that will open the lock, which none but that of God's appointing will do. (134)

New draws on Moore's particular engagement with Baxter and his vision of the Saints' "Rest" to argue that Moore's poems of the 1930s evidence her "deep skepticism about poetic 'works,' about the poem's originality, or the poet's own stature" (1998, 246). How does the poet know her works are the right works? How can she claim to be the originator of the poem, if "our righteousness, which the law of works requireth, and by which it is satisfied, is wholly in Christ, and not one grain in ourselves" (Baxter 1962, 35)?

Like several critics who follow her, New reads the jerboa as Moore's consummate emblem of the worker following the "appointed way" to labor in service of eternal Rest. The jerboa is the antithesis of the conquering, slave-owning, toy-making, empire-building people of Rome and Egypt. Instead of engaging in endless initiation, the jerboa works in harmony with creation, pursuing "happiness" rather than "pleasure" in a "deference" to



conditions as he finds them, where “deference is not weakness but strong adaptation” (1998, 259). Luke Carson (2002) extends the logic of New’s analysis to consider Moore’s own “strong adaptation” to conditions of economic scarcity in the Depression. In his reading of the contrast between the pangolin’s “solitary” (*A-Q* 27),<sup>8</sup> “not aggressive” (29) nightwork and “man slaving / to make his life more sweet” (30), Carson concludes:

Where “The Jerboa” discloses the historical world of necessity and scarcity only indirectly, “The Pangolin,” stressing the word slaving, explores a seemingly absolute disjunction between labor as a means and the fading possibility of sweetness as an end in life. . . . [However,] the economy of metaphor is abundant, as the word grace demonstrates. The commerce and conversivity of figures expand the ground of experience and enact the confusion of meanings that can point to grace as the emancipation of experience from terrestrial limits. (2002, 337, 340)

Carson’s shift to the medium of language itself as an active factor in our search for work that is not merely self-advancement is a significant development in the study of Moore’s response to Protestant accounts of “works.” According to him, language works in mysterious ways in “The Pangolin”: “Conversities convert things into other things, for example, a pangolin into an abbey and vice versa” (340), leaving open possibilities of redemptive meanings impossible to achieve by earthly labor. Ellen Levy takes up this thread, writing movingly about the end of “Armor’s Undermining Modesty”: The “clash between signifier and signified is one of the . . . sources of the poem’s notorious difficulty. . . . [Its] concluding lines . . . hold out the promise of a vision of a world in which the conflicting claims of ‘modesty’ and ‘depravity’—decorum and desire, law and freedom—might be not so much reconciled, as fully recognized, in all their dialectical force” (2011, 75). Jennifer Leader, in her recent study of the “typological tradition” in American letters, returns to the dialectic Levy defines in explicitly claiming language as the realm in which Moore found the most potential for unfallen labor. In preparation for her detailed reading of “The Jerboa” Leader claims that Moore’s animals are important because, like words, they are “signs differentiated from their symbolic contexts by their inherent otherness and mystery in connection to the natural world and . . . signifiers gesturing beyond themselves toward multiple possibilities of imaginatively constructed meaning” (2016, 146).



## “Pigeons” and Moore in the 1930s

Animals as the ever-changing subjects of natural and human selection, biological marvels to be studied with every modern theory close at hand? Or animals as signs of God’s revealed perfection, pervading our language with tantalizing clues to eternal, unchanging, divine mystery? As “thoughtful pupils” in Moore’s school, where paired “tree-of-knowledge— / [and] tree-of-life” preside, and we are instructed always to have at least “two thoughts” (A-Q 54) for every word, our answer must be “both.” Randall Jarrell, the best such pupil Moore has yet had, called her “Miss Facing-Both-Ways” (1953, 201), because for Moore there ultimately can be no “or” between the two paths our criticism has taken in talking about her scientific and religious influences.<sup>9</sup> Only the unfinished work of our own curiosity as readers makes them seem separate.

To speak pragmatically, our consideration of the scientific Moore must be brought forward into the poems of the 1930s, which, with their overt spiritual resonance, are currently largely the province of the Protestant Moore. Similarly, our readings of Moore’s Protestant conceptions of work, originality, and graceful rest in those poems will be enriched by taking into account Moore’s Darwinian understanding of animals as being “like literary texts . . . cultural entities with long histories” (McCabe 2009, 547). For example, while it may be true, as Schulze proposes, that Moore’s poems of the 1920s ask us to “go back to nature without heading through it in the name of upward comparisons,” her poems of the 1930s frequently look upward, at “the great crab-flounder of Montana caught // and changed from that which creeps to that which is angelic” (A-Q 55); the plumed basilisk, “aquatic flying / lizard-fairy” (81); the frigate pelican “glid[ing] / a hundred feet or quiver[ing] about / as charred paper behaves” (84); and, most particularly for my purposes, at pigeons flying “eight hundred sixty-eight miles / in four days and six hours” (102). Does Moore’s preoccupation with these “part terrestrial, / and part celestial” (68) creatures in the 1930s suggest she is no longer sure “that a poem is no way the product of some divine special creation above and beyond the mundane life of nature”? If Moore’s interest in natural history as a model for poetry was conditioned by her need to counter the threat of “the degeneration that followed in the wake of over civilization,” how should we understand her distinctly jaundiced portraits of American vigor in “The Steeple-Jack” and “Virginia Britannia” and her uniquely overt acknowledgment of the English Romantic ode in the latter?<sup>10</sup>



By the same token the scientific Moore productively challenges the idea that animals, even those as beloved as the jerboa and the pangolin, will adequately serve her as emblems of spiritual poise. New, Carson, and Leader all premise powerful readings of "The Jerboa" on the spiritual lesson of the jerboa's privileged freedom and strength in remaining "untouched" by a striving for satisfaction. The jerboa—unlike the mongoose—doesn't ask that labor be the source of "pleasure" and therefore remains free to "honor[ ] the sand by assuming its color" (69). However, the wider context of Moore's engagement with evolutionary science suggests that such a perspective holds good only as long as one looks at a single moment in the jerboa's history as representative of a species. The jerboa we know may live in a singularly harmonious state with its surroundings, but according to the inexorable laws of natural selection the jerboa we know today is not the jerboa of the past and will not be the jerboa of the future. In the longer view of a species' trajectory, there is no such thing as an immutably perfect match between organism and environment, because both change constantly. Adaptability to change, even when it is violent, is the only supreme evolutionary good. So, while it may be true in ethical terms that if you "plunder [the jerboa's] food store," you "will be cursed," in evolutionary terms you will simply be one of innumerable events shaping jerboa-kind from the inside and out. Those individuals quicker to find new stores, or born with new digestive mutations, will propagate new and different jerboas.

At issue in the intersection of the jerboa as Protestant emblem and as Darwinian subject are the virtues and dangers of remaining "untouched." Read in the first light, as a Protestant emblem of freedom from worldly human covetousness and desire to dominate, the jerboa models an attractive, peaceful solitude. Rather than "course" it (as the speaker does the butterfly in "Half Deity," for example), the reader is invited to glimpse it from a distance, "between leaps to its burrow" where, it is implied, it is safe from our physical intervention and our moral example. A Darwinian reading, however, would assert that no animal is "untouched" by the forces of chance, with respect to both its genetic makeup and the territory it inhabits. Nor would it benefit any organism to be so. Organisms that don't respond to challenges rapidly lose fitness, a point made distinctly by Green's analysis of the isolated and therefore inbred "glass-eyed ponies" and colorless flora of the glacier's heights in "An Octopus" (see Green 2005, 145–46).

Seen from this perspective the jerboa's "untouched" occupation of its ecological niche is just as likely to be its eventual undoing. In biological terms "rest" may mean "stasis," and stasis is the death of species, just



as Leader reminds us that rest as "stability" is death to poetry made of "signifiers gesturing beyond themselves toward multiple possibilities of imaginatively constructed meaning" (2016, 146). It is Moore who teaches that every idea, including that of "rest," has a double edge. If we are to be her students rather than mere undergraduates, to borrow her own distinction in "The Student," we must account for every poem Moore wrote as we map the career-long course of her ideas. In this case, a survey of Moore's poems of the thirties that features "The Jerboa" and "The Pangolin," as most have, might plausibly suggest that by the thirties Moore was no longer concerned about the evolutionary matters that concerned her in the twenties and was ready simply to place her faith in creatures not subject to humancentric breeding and selection. A survey that includes "Pigeons," however, makes that conclusion impossible.

## "Pigeons" and the problem of originality

One way to imagine a confluence of our views of Moore as a Darwinian thinker and Moore as a reader of Protestant theology is to see both perspectives as part of her larger, career-long meditation on the question of "originality." In Moore's work the word means both a study of origins (terrestrial or celestial?) and the desire to create new things, like syllabic poems that move "in leaps of two lengths" (*A-Q* 69) rather than rework ground already cultivated by others. In fact, "originality" is the issue on which Schulze's and New's arguments come together all but of their own accord. In a passage I cited earlier Schulze argues that Moore took from her reading of Darwin the idea that a species' success is directly related to the degree of "wildness," which is to say its origins before domestication, that it preserves. "The heroes of many of Moore's early poems," she writes, "tend to be animals and plants that manage to maintain some vestige of evolutionary fitness in spite of concerted efforts to alter them" (2013, 178). Schulze reads this evolutionary idea as the basis of Moore's championing art, including her own, that preserves its "pride in unserviceableness" (*CPr* 93), its "complicated starkness" (*A-Q* 43), its thorniness, in the face of readers who prefer "smoothness" and conventionality. From a Darwinian perspective, pride in one's artistic originality, the determination to "do these / things which I do, which please / no one but myself" (*BMM* 87), is a supremely adaptive trait, allowing a national art to stay undomesticated and vigorous.



New, writing about "Camellia Sabina" and its far-gone inbred plants, comes to a (paradoxically) complementary conclusion. The celebration of originality, in the sense of the ambition "to do something that has never been thought of before" (CPr 421), which characterizes Moore's early poems, looks antithetical to the Protestant ethic New describes, in which the subject is "schooled against autonomous operations" and is "unlikely to look for redemption in the cutting of an 'individual' figure" (New 1998, 243). "Camellia Sabina" would seem to portray the pernicious (in the Darwinian sense Schulze describes) results of such self-seeking in the world of horticulture: however beautiful the hothouse flowers it describes may be, they are fatally weakened, deprived of their native hardiness. "In the camellia-house there must be no smoke from the stove, nor dew on the windows . . . lest the plants ail," we are told; "mistakes are irreparable and nothing will avail" (A-Q 71). New, however, does not read the poem as an allegory of the maker's moral duty not to interfere in the work of creation "lest the plants ail." Instead, she reads the poem's catalogue of violent manipulations of the natural world in the name of culture as a more ambivalent expression of Moore's stance on works. "Moore leaves no doubt," she concludes, "that the rare, talismanic lexicons of oenological exactitude and horticultural care emit a certain charm; discrimination results from the discipline of intelligence; and its object, from the application of skill. Yet both may also breed cruelty: rarity may claim prestige through the thwarting of satisfaction. It is not, to be precise, craft itself but craft's causal estrangement from some motivating origin that yields the epicureanism that 'makes the soul heavy'" (1998, 255). In that final distinction, "not . . . craft, but craft's causal estrangement from some motivating origin," New's Protestant reading meets Schulze's Darwinian one: at the heart of both is the search for an origin, whether in the wildness of a species or in the worker's adherence to Christ's "appointed way," that sustains and valorizes all subsequent, and inevitable, variations of form.

No Moore poem is more directly concerned with this search, in both its scientific and spiritual dimensions, than "Pigeons." Had she set out to do so Moore could hardly have designed a poem to bring together more explicitly scientific facts of evolution as she understood them with numinous meaning as she felt it. Although "Pigeons," unusually for a Moore poem of its length, has no notes associated with it, even a glancing familiarity with Moore's reading habits shows it to be a field guide to her scientific and Protestant sources. Both Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868)—the



latter Moore's "best-thumbed volume of Darwin's work" (Schulze 2013, 176)—treat pigeons at length. Pictures of and articles about pigeons were a staple of the *Illustrated London News* from its earliest issues; of particular note are the ten stories it published between 1912 and 1919 that featured the role of carrier pigeons in World War I. In the early 1930s W. P. Pycraft dedicated two of his "World of Science" columns to pigeons: in "Is the Passenger Pigeon Extinct? The March of Extermination" (1930) he recounts the story of the passenger pigeon's twentieth-century extinction (while holding out tenuous hope it may not have been quite complete),<sup>11</sup> and in "Variations on a Theme of Darwin's: Domesticated Pigeons" (1933), he discusses his own pigeon keeping and the ramifying consequences of show-bench standards on the ever-evolving birds.

The pigeon's pedigree as an object of scientific interest is matched by its fitness as a Christian emblem. In the passage I quoted as my second epigraph, Richard Baxter singles out the carrier pigeon as a model for the reader's relationship to Christ. As pigeon keepers are assisted by their carriers to "bear letters of intercourse from friend to friend," so should the Christian rely on "the Dove of God" to carry on an easy correspondence with heaven. Baxter's lesson is of special relevance to makers: spiritual wings assembled, feather by feather, from close observation of living, real birds will not end in the disaster of Icarus but fulfill the "right Dedalian flight" (1962, 136). Imitating the work of pigeons, in other words, will not ensnare the poet or the reader in the prideful pitfalls of works. If Baxter's imprimatur were not enough, Patricia Willis reports that Moore's grandfather, the Reverend John Riddle Warner, used the carrier pigeon's homing instinct as an example of God's revealed perfection in one of his own sermons, in a volume edited by Moore's mother, Mary Warner Moore (see Willis 2005, 54n32).

The poem's inquiry into the nature and meaning of "origins" is built on this convergence of sources. Moore traces in its eponymous birds evidence of every kind of virtue and vice the idea of "originality" has accrued in its Darwinian and Protestant histories. Moore roots pigeons' fitness, biologically and spiritually speaking, in the traces of their wild origins that have persisted despite thousands of years of domestication. On one hand, the exciting diversity of modern pigeons testifies to Darwin's correct attention to facts rather than precepts and proves that for the poet as well "no fact of science . . . might / not as well be known" (A-Q 56). On the other, pigeons are living examples of creatures guided, like "The Hero," unerringly not by "sight" but by "inner light" (59) and as such participate in a way "appointed" for them. The poem broods on the



consequences of humankind's fascination with these dual-natured birds. Like the pigeons developed by the "Gentlemen of the Feather Club" in the poem's final lines, our historical relations with pigeons are "all extremes." At the same time that human ingenuity, in the form of selective breeding, has produced beautiful birds it would be a loss never to have seen, now-extinct pigeons are tragic markers of mankind's destructive carelessness. Having destroyed some pigeons ("Didus ineptus; man's remorse / enshrines it now"), endangered others ("The Samoan / tooth-billed pigeon . . . / saved from destruction by no longer feeding on / the ground" [104]), and invented flamboyant new varieties ("the mediievally / two-colored sea-pie-patterned semi-swan / necked magpie pigeon" [105]), we have entwined our destiny with theirs without, the poem suggests, having ever altered their distinctive, original mystery, or finally having learned from that mystery how to rightly pursue our craftsmanship.

"Mystery," Moore's privileged term in "The Hero" for private, interior power, is central to the mixed heritage, equally terrestrial and celestial, that Moore reveres in pigeons: "a mysterious animal," she calls one, "with a magnetic feel / by which he traces back- / ward his transportation outward" (102). Like Darwin, Moore considers "the question of [pigeons'] origin . . . of fundamental importance," though it matters to her for more than scientific reasons. The poem begins by squarely addressing that question in terms taken from *Origin of Species*, noting that while the pigeon family is a "ramifying one," with innumerable offshoots and sports, it is nonetheless a tree with a single trunk, "a / banyan of banyans." Also like Darwin, who traced with pleasure the pigeon's millennia-long history of domestication,<sup>12</sup> the poem emphasizes the antiquity of the pigeon family, calling it "older than the ancient Greeks, than / Solomon" (A-Q 101). Moore's terms are significant, however, because they introduce the double resonance of all the subsequent pigeon histories she will name. Calling them older than Solomon and the ancient Greeks locates the birds not only on a human historical timeline but also on a scale of human knowledge: pigeons predate both the Old Testament wisdom Moore revered and the Greek aesthetic philosophy, with its "lik[ing for] smoothness" (BMM 130), she mistrusted. Whatever the pigeon's true origin is it is prior to the traditions we have names for.

Nevertheless, the names we have given pigeons denote our intuitions about the birds' true lineage. It is suggestive that we name pigeons at all. Throughout her poems of the 1930s Moore repeatedly looks for birds (or, in one case, lizards) that will serve as adequate American responses to the iconic birds of the English Romantic lyric. To paraphrase "The



Plumet Basilisk," they have their birds (owl, skylark, and nightingale), and, in Moore's poems, we have ours: mocking-bird ("Virginia Britannia" and "Bird-Witted"), frigate pelican, basilisk, and pigeon. Among these animals, only pigeons have proper names, and the poem delights in reciting them. The more recent of these names, Cher Ami, Mocker, Sergeant Dunn, and Spike, honor the pigeons who worked as comrades-in-arms with French and British soldiers during the first World War. Older names imply contact between realms more widely divided than European countries at war: with literal and figurative meaning Moore calls "Hermes, Ariel, [and] Leander— / pigeons of the past" (*A-Q* 102), messengers between land and sea, heaven and earth, then and now.

While pigeons' service to man earns them the immortality associated with individual names, however, the poem emphasizes the pigeon's fundamental humility: "he is not Theudas / boasting himself to be some- / body, this anonymous post- / man" (103). Capable of justifying military confidence, "swift and sure, coming quickest and / straightest just after a storm" (101), even with one eye destroyed "delivering his dispatch / to his superiors" (102), the pigeon is nevertheless fundamentally peaceable and homeloving, "a not exciting bird" who likes best to "rejoin his ungainly pin-clad dark-skinned / brood" (103). Unlike the frigate pelican who "hides / in the height and in the majestic / display of his art," or the basilisk making eerie, native forest music as its "spiderclawed fingers . . . twang the / bass strings of the harp" (32), or even the noble pangolin moving with the "frictionless creep of a thing / made graceful by adversities" (29), the pigeon is itself "an instrument not just an instinctive / individual" (103). Like Baxter's saint at rest, the pigeon is willingly played on by outside forces beyond control, at the service of a "magnetic feel" appointed to it so that it can carry messages it need not understand: "valentines and messages of / state; or soberer news." Nor can it understand its role as an instrument for the visually inclined gentlemen breeders to create elaborate pictures:

. . . an all-feather piebald,  
cuckoo-marked on a titanic scale  
taking perhaps sixteen birds to  
show the whole design (105)

These instrumental birds, guided by origins untraceably deep in genetic, mythological, and religious history, so easy to destroy ("defenceless unsuspecting / things" [104]) yet characterized by an indestructible love ("two. Invariably / two" [103]) that makes them utterly reliable in the



face of hardship, epitomize a conflict in Moore's feelings about human "works" that cannot be elided. Unlike the jerboa, the pigeon has no wild burrow to which it can retreat from our view and thus preserve our wish for creatures to be "untouched." Unlike French camellias, even our most extravagantly bred pigeons are too hardy, too, finally, useful to be written off as simple victims of human, aesthetically motivated cruelty. Moore deplores our extinction of pigeons and the breach between earthly works and heavenly rest those extinctions point to. However, she also loves our new pigeons, "th[ese] delight- / ful bird[s]" that "outd[o] the dashing / black and white Dalmation dog and map-freckled / pony" (105) as much as any fancier, as much, in fact, as the Egyptians love the "small things" (65) they create in "The Jerboa." In that poem, Moore managed her own distaste for and fascination with the works of slave-keeping people (no one was likelier than Moore to appreciate "bone boxes" with "reverted duck- / head" and "stone locusts") by separating her feelings into sections: "Too Much" and "Abundance," respectively.

"Pigeons," by contrast, has only one long section to contain Moore's contradictory responses. Her dilemma is best encapsulated in lines 94-95, in which the poem turns from contemplating extinct pigeons to admiring new ones: "A new pigeon cannot compensate, but we have / it" (104). There is so much, she implies, for which human artifice cannot compensate: our ignorance and disrespect of wild creature's "mysterious" origins, our willingness to appropriate and destroy fitness in our restless pursuit of the new. And yet, we have the products of that pursuit, and they have beauty also. In the case of "Pigeons" the new bird is "a slender Cinderella" (105), a creature of legendary beauty and goodness unalterable by the patina of tragic circumstance that robs her of her original family. In fact the point of Cinderella's story, in the original version Moore knew, is that she is still protected by the love of her dead mother, on whose grave a willow "threw / on Cinderella what she wished" (92). Like the fairy-tale princess for whom she is named, even the most recent pigeon, as far distanced from her untouched genetic past as it is possible to be, and as subject to man's fallen labor as any plant or animal we know, yet has a life entwined with the supernatural.

When it comes to the natural world, what is our innocence, what is our guilt? There is no neat way to sum up the story of pigeons, or of "Pigeons." The birds do not rise from the land where people are, like the frigate pelican; they stay here with us, "humbly dedicated" (105) to



service, patiently living out the genetic destinies we impose on them. This subjection means that their losses, unlike those of the nocturnal “quicksilver feroci[ous] basilisk,” are not “temporary” (80) but permanent, and beyond compensation. Man’s remorse may “enshrine” those losses, but biological extinction works in only one direction. At the same time, the marks of pigeons’ divine origins persist, as polymorphous and ineradicable as the markings on their wings. Ariel, Hermes, and Leander were pigeons; Cinderella is a pigeon; who knows what figure from which mythology will next incarnate itself in a pigeon of the future? More to the point, how can we know in advance what opportunity for incarnation our own crafting of pigeons will create or foreclose? In the face of such conflicting feelings and unanswerable questions, the poem, marveling at the new pigeon, trails off into a brief silence: “a surprise- / ing modernness and fanciness / and stateliness and . . .” (105). It settles, finally, with a delicate balance of resignation and appreciation, for calling it “a dainty breed.” Wherever it came from, or is going, the speaker implies, the modern pigeon is here and must be contemplated with as open a mind as we can bring to it.

The time is right for us to do the same for “Pigeons,” and for the flock of lost Moore poems to which it belongs. The vitality of our critical stories about Moore depends on it. The late thirties were a productive and ultimately transformative time for Moore’s poetry, a time in which she was writing difficult poems that do difficult things. In the case of “Pigeons,” Moore the avid lay scientist converges overtly with Moore the faithful and seeking inheritor of a particular system of religious beliefs about works, including the work of poetry. Attending to that convergence shows the extent to which periodized studies that separate those facets of her thinking contribute, however unintentionally, to a false picture of her poetry’s trajectory. Despite Moore’s own efforts to alter the record of her work in the late thirties, we now have it clearly before us, in all its complexity. We must take advantage of this circumstance, guided by Moore’s own faith that doing so can but enrich our ever-deepening understanding of her art.

## §

Heather Cass White is professor of English at the University of Alabama. She is the editor most recently of the *New Collected Poems of Marianne Moore* (2017).



## Notes

1. For the full story of Moore's thinking about the contents of *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, see A-Q xv–xxii.
2. When I say that Moore's Protestantism is important I mean not that it has been exhaustively pursued in recent criticism but that it should be. Protestantism was the intellectual air of Moore's childhood and one of the principal dialects of the language she spoke with her mother and brother. Devotional reading and its elaborations in religious philosophy are central to every account Moore gave of her own intellectual development. One reason this aspect of her practice has yet to be accorded the weight it deserves, relative to issues like feminism, queer theory, and the visual arts, is that the latter subjects are of more immediate import to the (broadly speaking) secular literary establishment of the past three decades. The predominance of one and the relative scarcity of the other are perhaps a misleading measure of their significance to Moore.
3. In addition to "Pigeons" they included "The Steeple-Jack" in 1933, "The Buffalo" and "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" in 1934, and "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks" in 1936.
4. The seven revised poems are "The Steeple-Jack," "The Student," "The Frigate Pelican," "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain," "Half Deity," "Virginia Britannia," and "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks." The five not included in *Collected Poems* are "The Student," "Half Deity," "Pigeons," "See in the Midst of Fair Leaves," and "Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks."
5. The notable early exception to this rule is John Slatin, whose book *The Savage's Romance* (1986) made a point of reading Moore's poems in their earliest published versions. Robin Schulze's *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002), a facsimile-based variorum edition of Moore's work through 1924, gave rise to the current resurgence of interest in Moore's original poems and collections. At present it is still not standard critical practice to identify the version of a poem one is reading or to consider earlier versions as a matter of course. More generally there is a practical disincentive to pursuing scholarship on Moore in the 1930s: the passage of the 1997 Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act means that all of Moore's work published after 1923 will not enter the public domain until 2042 (seventy years after Moore's death). Permission to reprint Moore's copyrighted work is expensive and time-consuming to obtain. This may help explain why other "lost" Moore poems, such as "Roses Only" (1917) and "Black Earth" (1918), have received more attention.
6. See McCabe 2009, White and Carson 2010, Schulze 2008, and White and Carson 2011.
7. "Pigeons" is mentioned by Hadas (1977, 106, 109), Jeanne Heuvig (1992, 155), and Margaret Holley (1987, numerous times). The 1941 *What Are Years*



## "Pigeons" and the Future of Moore Criticism

version of "Walking Sticks" is treated at some length by Bonnie Costello (1981, 105–7), and the original is cited by Hadas (1977, 72, 138). Fiona Green compares the two versions (2000, 211–12), as does Schulze in a larger argument about editing Moore (2008, 129–31).

8. Abbreviations refer to these Moore texts: *CPr*, *Complete Prose* (1986); *BMM*, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002); and *A-Q*, *A-Quiver with Significance* (2008).

9. Ellen Levy brought Jarrell's nickname to my attention at a crucial moment.

10. Readers of Schulze's work will know that I am implicitly asking her to connect the dots between two phases of her own thinking about Moore. In *The Web of Friendship* (1995) she herself writes incisively about Moore's upward vision in "The Frigate Pelican" and her displacement of Keats's nightingale in "The Plumet Basilisk."

11. Moore may herself have been aware of the extinction at the time it happened. In 1915, the year after the last known passenger pigeon died in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo, Moore published her first poems in *Poetry* magazine. Asked by Harriet Monroe to give them a group title, Moore suggested "Tumblers, Pouters, and Fantails" (*BMM* 166), breeds of ornamental pigeons.

12. Susan McCabe details the extent of Darwin's involvement with pigeons and pigeon-fanciers between 1855 and 1858 when, as she reports, "he chose . . . to breed pigeons . . . to test and explain his theory of artificial selection" (2009, 547).

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## Marianne Moore's Finish

*Christina Pugh*

**T**hough not as synonymous with the lyric as musicality or apostrophe often seem to be, the concept of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1968) once called "poetic closure" is crucial to our sense of a lyric poem's very identity. From the closing couplet that transformed the Italianate sonnet into the Shakespearean, to W. B. Yeats's famous notion that a poem "comes right with a click, like a closing box" (1940, 24) to Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "end of the poem" as an "event" (1999, 113), poets and readers have long been invested in the importance of lyric closure. Closure constitutes our sense of a finished phrase, of a form being completed or, in Smith's words, a "sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or 'clinch'" (1968, 2). Contemporary culture offers us yet another definition of closure: getting "closure on" a situation such as a loved one's death, a divorce, or another conflictual or traumatic event. Considered in that light, when does a poet get "closure" on a printed poem? Does publication always provide the closure that the lyric poem, as a genre, often spotlights? In Marianne Moore's case, the answer is no. By looking closely at Moore's revisions of "Half Deity," we can see a clear teleology within a single poem's development, one that was not completed but instead "interrupted" by print publication. As "Half Deity" shows in its various incarnations, Moore's revisions comprised a journey to lyric speech: a "finish" that could not always be achieved by publication alone.

In order to understand this progression, we should first consider the crucial and sometimes counterintuitive roles that revision and publication played, not only for Moore herself but also within the critical reception of other American women poets who were her forebears and contemporaries. For Moore, the ostensible closure afforded by publishing poems was like a closed door that could be perpetually reopened, sometimes with radical results. Arguably the most controversial of these was her revision of "Poetry" to a miniaturist and epigrammatic three



lines. As Heather Cass White has written, sometimes Moore's "revisions" of her poems were extensive enough to constitute what "might justifiably be called new poems under old names" (*A-Q* xix).<sup>1</sup> Such magnitude of revision, coupled with Moore's publication history, means that the earlier versions of Moore's published poems have been until recently unavailable to nonspecialist readers; Robin Schulze's *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002) was the first edition that reproduced and documented the original presentations of these early poems. Republishing Moore's poetry between 1932 and 1941 therefore became a necessity for those who, like White, value Moore's early "polysemous complexity" over her later "didactic simplicity" (*AG* xiii). Commenting on the same "didactic simplicity" in Moore's later work, Linda Leavell also writes, "Self-respecting critics might now complain of her sentimentality but no longer of her inscrutability" (2013, 346).

On the heels of Schulze's work have come several republications of Moore's major poems: *A-Quiver with Significance: Marianne Moore 1932-1936* (2008) and *Adversity and Grace: Marianne Moore 1936-1941* (2012), both edited by White; and a new edition of Moore's *Observations* (2016), edited by Leavell. At first glance, such republication seems to jibe with many literary critics' current fascination with *prepublication*, including manuscript and unpublished materials, particularly as seen in recent facsimile editions of poems by Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. But while the Dickinson and Bishop projects have emphasized indeterminacy and what I have elsewhere called "the unfinished" (Pugh 2012, 276), the republication of Moore's poetry between 1932 and 1941 reveals instead a poet's progression toward lyric communication in her art. Specifically, Moore's work moved toward a lyric autonomy that, without sacrificing complexities of diction and syntax, became more populist in its scope, as Elizabeth Gregory writes, "to speak to shifting social concerns and to engage wider audiences" (2015, 762), thereby reaching back to the origins of lyric in the oral tradition. In other words, if placed in the context of Moore's longer development as a poet, the republication of work whose "polysemous complexity" was transformed to "didactic simplicity" does not necessarily celebrate the polysemous as such. For example, Gregory sees the seeds of Moore's later populism sown—if obliquely, at times—in her early poems: "Her late manifestation as a popular poet follows through on the anti-hierarchical aspect of the early work, crossing the cultural tracks from the elite world of her youthful phase" (763). Moore's revisions also come to support the template of a more autonomous lyric poem,



one that resists too much dependence on outside, materialist “prosthetics” and reconstitutes itself—if unexpectedly—in the sonorous tradition of the spoken lyric voice, as discussed by W. R. Johnson in *The Idea of Lyric* (1982).

In one sense, to note such a progression in Moore's work is nothing new; such critics as Bonnie Costello, John Slatin, and Margaret Holley have discussed Moore's embrace of a more autonomous mode of poetic expression after the Second World War (see Costello 1981, 13; Holley 1987; and Slatin 1986, 209–10). My point expands on theirs, however, by putting the recent republications of Moore's earlier work into a contemporary context that often reads experimentalist nonclosure into women poets' uncollected, never-published, or subsequently revised works. By looking closely at “Half Deity,” I'll instead try to show an inchoate teleology we can trace in Moore's early publication and revisions of her poems, revealing them as a pathway to Moore's later and more traditional lyricism rather than as exemplars of a more experimental mode that the poet eventually discarded.

At first glance, of course, such an argument seems to run counter to Moore's rich and continuing engagement with diverse (including scientific) source materials, as well as to the “collage” aspect of her poetry that, for many, represents both a commonplace in her work and an essential aspect of her participation in modernism (see Costello 1981, 211–13). Moore herself said that she could “see no reason for calling [her] work poetry except that there is no other category in which to put it” (CPr 648). Despite Moore's reluctance to be categorized and her clear suspicion of hypertrophic generic distinctions, White's two volumes reveal the poet's developing commitment to a freestanding lyric, to spoken voice, and to revision as a means to the many faces of “finish.” Unlike the cases of Bishop and Dickinson, moreover, Moore's publication history also shows *finish* to be a verb, because the poet eventually excises poems from her complete works. Though this is an extreme and literalizing version of *finish*—as in “finishing off”—it also makes the republication of Moore's work an exception to the trend that valorizes the “unfinished” and even, arguably, a corrective to that trend writ large. The “neatness of finish” that Moore extols in “An Octopus,” then, has multiple valences for a poet who also has a vast “capacity for fact” (BMM 131).

I interpret “the unfinished” as a critical resistance both to standard print publication and to the notion of “poetic closure” with which I began this essay. We can find a popular recent example of it in *The Gorgeous Nothings* (2012), Marta Werner and Jen Bervin's facsimile book



of Dickinson's scrap and "envelope" poems. Despite the fascination that the book elicits in many readers, the choice to present facsimiles of Dickinson's handwriting on "scraps"—perhaps the "cocktail napkin" of today—overemphasizes the aleatory, fluctuating aspects of her oeuvre. Bervin writes that Dickinson's envelope poems were shaped by and even possibly generated by the morphologies of the scraps on which she wrote them: "When Dickinson approached her compositional space to write, she was reading and responding to her materials, angling the page to write in concert with the light rule and laid lines in the paper, using internal surface divisions, such as overlapping planes of paper, to compose in a number of directional fields" (Dickinson 2012, 10).

In this way, Bervin portrays Dickinson as an experimental poet who is responding to material constraints like paper shapes rather than to metrical or lyric ones. Such an experimental aesthetic—fragmentary writings that are, by definition, in a state of nonclosure—epitomizes an attraction to what I am calling "the unfinished." In this way, the experimental values of the Language school's "rejection of closure" dovetail with scholarly work on Dickinson, while the figure of Susan Howe embodies that very convergence by defining Dickinson's poems as "visual productions" (Dickinson 2012, 10; see *A-Q* 22 and *AG* 31). Admittedly, we don't know nearly enough about the importance Dickinson would have placed on her writing tools as such, or her thinking about poems that she never copied into her fascicles. Even so, this critical tack has been perhaps all too appealing lately. It appeals in part because the "fixing" of Dickinson's handwriting into print, for large-scale consumption—and the Procrustean harnessing of her punctuation—happened posthumously, at the hands of her editors. In the case of Elizabeth Bishop, the posthumous *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box* (2006) contained printed poems that Bishop had never seen fit to publish—thereby causing some readers to feel that the book robbed Bishop of her agency as an artist, which had been expressed over the course of her lifetime in those very omissions. For this reason, critics such as Helen Vendler believe the posthumous publication of Bishop's poems robbed the poet of the intellectual, prosodic, and linguistic "finish" (Vendler 2006, 33) she had applied to her published work.

Arguments for and against these publications often hinge upon critics' projections of a poet's intentions around print publication. Dickinson manuscript scholars often state that printed editions cannot capture Dickinson's idiosyncrasies—and that this is a reason she turned away from print publication in the first place. Bishop's editors have argued that by



not burning her unpublished poems, Bishop slyly revealed her “intention” that her unpublished work should, in fact, be published; even her close friend Lloyd Schwartz has said that Bishop was “quite prepared for [the drafts’] posthumous publication” (2012, 54). Yet Moore’s case is more unusual than either of these, since her authorial intent cannot viably be correlated with any particular decisions she made about publishing her work. If anything, Moore’s publishing history forces a more complex view of “intent” itself, as Robin Schulze has explained: “What to do . . . with poets like Moore who, over the course of her career, seemed to want her public to have numerous different published versions of her texts?” (*BMM* 6). To the possible response that Moore’s *Complete Poems*, so carefully arranged by the poet herself, constituted “final” or decidable intent, Schulze replies that “[*Complete Poems*] has suppressed the historical fact of her changing texts and offered readers only the very latest versions of her poems, the elderly Moore’s revisions of the texts of her own exuberant youth” (6–7). As Schulze reminds us, Moore expressed her “intent” diachronically—by either drastically revising or omitting these poems in later editions. Thus the question of “finish,” and its relationship to authorial intent, becomes the proverbial double-edged sword in Moore’s case. On the one hand, she seems to render her poems openwork by refusing to accept their published versions as their static or finished forms, thus potentially moving toward an embrace of indeterminacy, with print publication posing no obstacle to perpetual revision and reformulation afterward. On the other hand, however, her revisions themselves often serve to *reduce* localized indeterminacy in the texts of the poems themselves. How can these two values be squared? Should they be?

In our contemporary moment, it’s perhaps enticing to look at only one side of this equation, thereby pressing Moore into the service of the experimental, post-Language aesthetic that Dickinson is now often seen to represent. In a recent essay, for example, Alexandra Pechman writes that Moore’s relationship to the revision process is “a 21st-century problem,” adding that Moore’s “habits of research and revision presaged the far-reaching sourcing and pliability that defines writing made in the age of the Internet” (2016, 2). Pechman’s emphasis on poetic “pliability” not only invokes the perpetually erasable text gifted to contemporary writers by Microsoft Word or other word processing programs but also brings to mind the variants and indeterminacy that loom so large in Dickinson’s production, at least in the minds of her contemporary critics. Pechman



sees in Moore's work the hallmark of the perpetually "unfinished," then, much in opposition to a certain kind of lyric monumentality that is perhaps epitomized by Shakespeare's *Sonnet 55*. And Jorie Graham's blurb for the recent *Observations* reprint makes many of the same moves: she describes Moore's poems as "imprinted by the science of our moment" and building "new realities like a 3-D printer or the marvelous precisions of astrophysics" (Moore 2016, inside jacket). In its coupling of a 3-D printer with astrophysics, then, this description claims that Moore's work encompasses both supermimesis and hyperrelativity. Graham's blurb recalls William Carlos Williams's declaration in 1948 that "the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age" all the while celebrating "the new physics" (2004, 52) of a particular age. With her armored animals and ear for the unexpected rhythms within scientific diction, Moore has always been an obvious candidate for these kinds of convergences, but the marriage between relativity and "the unfinished" seems more perfectly consummated in our own age than in Williams's.

Without downplaying the indispensable role of research and scientific fact in Moore's poetry, I'd like to interpret her revisions not as promoting indeterminacy but instead as revealing a lyric teleology, one that participated in print publication but that also rejected the props provided by any *particular* print publication. Thus, in dialogue with fact and information Moore was committed to shaping—from that very material—a more radical autonomy of the lyric poem, one whose changes both highlighted the epigrammatic moment within lengthier poems and also lent itself to the poetry reading, including the performances that became important to the latter part of Moore's life and helped to create her poetic "celebrity."

The life-span and eventual disappearance—into the "uncollected"—of Moore's poem "Half Deity" provides a case study for this very development, as well as an allegory of the poetic trajectory that should foil the urge to view Moore and her work in a perpetually experimental, revisionist state. The poem appeared first in the periodical *Direction* (1935), but I will be focusing here on the version first collected in Moore's *The Pangolin and Other Verse* in 1936, accompanied by an illustration by George Plank, as well as Moore's significant revisions of this poem for its subsequent republication in *What Are Years* in 1941.<sup>4</sup> The poem was not included in the *Collected* (1951) or *Complete Poems* (1994), the books that made Moore's greater output available in later decades.



Both the 1936 and 1941 versions of "Half Deity" describe a nymph unsuccessfully chasing a swallowtail butterfly. The two versions' differences, however, show a sizable development both in Moore's outreach to her audience and in her thinking about the autonomy of the lyric poem. First, Moore rejects proper names in the poem's revision. In *Pangolin's* earlier version, the nymph is named Psyche, thus paying heed not only to the Roman story of Cupid and Psyche by Lucius Apuleius but also to the greater intellectual atmosphere of Freudian psychoanalysis; by 1935, when the poem appeared in *Direction*, Freud was near the end of his life. In a sense, then, the Psyche character in the earlier version has been diffused into the atmosphere of the lowercase (and absent from the poem) *psyche*: the psyche that is not Moore's usual provenance in poems but that now becomes the background or atmosphere, rather than the explicit subject matter, of this poem's revision and its managing of thwarted and triangulated desire. The absent Psyche is now the poem's unsaid drive.

As White notes, the deletion of Psyche's name also dissolves an intertextual patina from the poem: "References to an earlier text a reader must know or learn in order to more fully read the poem are removed. The stakes of the nymph's drama are altered by these changes" (AG xxv). Yet Moore removes or otherwise demotes a proper name not once but three times in the poem's revision. Not only is the nymph unnamed in the 1941 version of *What Are Years*, but the third and triangulating character named Zephyr in the first version—that is, Zephyr from the "Psyche and Cupid" story—becomes demoted to "the zephyr" in the later version of the poem.

What I am calling the "demotion" of these first two proper names has important effects. By loosening the ties between the poem and the generating Apuleius story, Moore's revision weakens the poem's reliance on classical literary allusion and thus provides it more autonomy *as* a twentieth-century artifact, regardless of the still-anachronistic language that continues to make even "nymph" possible as an appellation. Still, along these lines, one can't help but remember Wallace Stevens's point about Plato's winged chariot in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": as cultural imagination changes, Stevens suggests, "the figure becomes antiquated and rustic" (1997, 643). Moore too seems to realize that the timbre of her readers' imagination has changed—or at least their felt connection to a story told in ancient Rome.



As Moore demotes the allusion, her poem becomes more inclusive: it is hard to imagine a reader who would be unable to identify with a figure who fruitlessly pursues the object of her (or his) desire. And who among us has not lost out, in love or achievement, to a competitor we could swear is more “detached”—less desirous than us, and therefore less deserving—as in the psychologically astute addition Moore makes to describe the victorious zephyr in her later, *What Are Years* version? When she writes that the zephyr’s “detachment was enough / to tempt the fiery tiger-horse to stand” (AG 33), Moore hits a powerful nerve. So while White accurately notes that “desire itself, however, the very crux of Psyche’s story, becomes with her name’s erasure a weakened element in the poem” (AG xxv), I would also suggest that this weakening of allusion acts as a strategic diffusing into a Freudian moment that is less localized and instead becomes the very air that makes the narrative possible.

The revision of the proper name Zephyr into “the zephyr” also suggests the sea changes that occur in language over time, such that proper names become detached from their persons. In recent parlance, for example, the slang verb *bogarting*, meaning a refusal to share, has nearly lost its origins in the Hollywood figure of Humphrey Bogart—and is, moreover, written in lowercase, similarly to *zephyr*. When read in concert with her earlier version of “Half Deity,” then, Moore’s revision nods to the way that a proper name “drifts,” coming to anchor in the greater language community. Conversely, the second version of the poem shows the way that familiar nouns (or verbs like *to bogart*) gaze perpetually over their shoulders into the mirror of their own former personifications—which are sometimes their eponymous human instantiations.

This is in keeping with the third “demotion” of a proper name in the revision: Moore’s transformation of the *Pangolin* version’s “West Wind” to the lowercase “west wind” in the poem’s republication. Though subtle, this diminution of the wind’s proper name also distances it from both the anonymous sixteenth-century English lyric “Westron Wynd” and the “wild West Wind” addressed in Shelley’s “Ode” (1820). In this way, the traditional objects of apostrophe have become transformed from discrete listeners into a version of the environment itself, much as Psyche’s proper name was diffused into the backdrop of Freudian psychoanalysis. To be sure, the environment of the revised “Half Deity” is still fanciful and animated by personification—but it is less populated by characters of a decidedly literary, allusive stamp.



In her revision of "Half Deity," Moore also distances the poem from the specifically visual props provided by the Brendin Publication Company's production of *Pangolin*—the poems' accompanying illustrations by George Plank—in a move that reflects another facet in her developing sense of lyric autonomy. Far, then, from the "visual productions" that Howe saw Dickinson's fascicles to constitute, and far from a dependence on the material conditions of publication, Moore's revision of "Half-Deity" in *What Are Years* serves instead to distance the poem from its erstwhile visual supplement in various ways. In *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, Plank's drawings precede, and sometimes bookend, each of Moore's poems. At the head of "Half Deity" he has depicted the silhouette of a rearing horse, diagonally framed by two clouds at head and rump (figure 1). The lower of these clouds drapes like



Figure 1. George Plank (1935). "Half-Deity."

a transparent garment across the horse-figure's lower half. A fraction of the area where its mane should be is obscured by the almost cumulous "aura" of a swallowtail butterfly floating toward the upper left diagonal of the picture. Since there is no "actual" horse in the poem, Plank's



illustration strongly supports the poem's reliance on and propulsion of metaphor—that is, its conjuring of horse and zebra figures to describe the “Half Deity” swallowtail butterfly. Moore describes the butterfly as “pawing / like a horse,” a “zebra half-deified,” and even a hybrid “fiery tiger-horse”; Plank has enlarged her metaphoric vehicle to fill more than half of the pictorial space, thus granting metaphor spatial sovereignty. Even at first glance, moreover, the drawing functions as an emblem: the perspective of the figures is decidedly antirealist, since the butterfly is more than half the size of the horse figure. And since that figure appears as a silhouette, we can identify it as neither horse nor zebra.

How did this image function, prosthetically, for readers? At least one important reader was enthusiastic about Plank's work. This was Moore's brother Warner, whose nickname for Moore was “Rat”:

That de luxe edition of Rat's work is a memorable thing everyway. I believe George Plank's drawings lift a veil, point out . . . a vista into the glories of Rat's mind that will afford such readers as our children and Constance the stimulation and light to look at, *and for that*, which such sensitive eyes as T. S. Eliot's have long seen in Rat's work. . . . I don't mean Rat's work is obscure in any way, ever—and least of all in these poems; but in this illustrating I feel Plank's work *is* very much like sunlight over mighty landscape, or as flashes of light over the rolling ocean. . . . The *instant* I saw the book, I resounded to such *effects* spiritually as I've tried to describe. (quoted in *A-Q* xxviii)

Warner Moore's very enthusiasm for the drawings may provide a key to Moore's reconfiguration of her poem after the *Pangolin* volume was published. For Warner, Plank's veiled horse figure serves, ironically, to “lift a veil” from Moore's work—that is, to make it accessible to readers like his own wife and children who might otherwise be deterred by its difficulty. (Fascinatingly, as we've seen, Plank has also depicted a metaphoric relationship that a less experienced reader, such as a child, might misinterpret as “real.”) The astute Moore may well have thought Warner was protesting too much in his haste to assure her that her work is never “obscure in any way, ever”; after all, she even critiqued her own work as “too oblique and obscure” (xxi). In her revision, as we'll see, Moore resists the notion that she needs Plank's help in order to lift the poems' “veils.”

According to Warner's letter, his reaction to the illustrations was instantaneous (“the *instant* I saw the book”). Such an immediate reaction



## Marianne Moore's Finish

harkens back to Lessing's distinction between the verbal and visual arts in *Laocoon*: "It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (2010, 477). Lessing also specifies that "painting can only use a *single moment* of action" (476, emphasis mine), as opposed to poetry. Clearly, an instantaneous reaction to a work of art can be exciting. But can a poem borrow instantaneity from a pictorial illustration? Moore once said, "It ought to be work to read something that it was work to write" (quoted in Leavell 2013, 347). Can a difficult poem, such as hers, ever achieve the instantaneity of visual art? Though Moore's revisions are not drastic, her new version of the poem will take on some of the immediacy Warner found in Plank's *Pangolin* illustrations. In the new version of "Half Deity," the horse metaphor is buttressed by a repetition of words rather than by an accompanying image. With the absence of Plank's horse/zebra silhouette that both magnifies and encapsulates the trope of resemblance, Moore introduces the metaphor earlier and, in so doing, also makes an argument for metaphoric thinking as a viable way to approach the world. She repeats "zebra" in the lines that have transformed into the rhetorical question that comprises the third clause in the poem's opening:

What zebra

could surpass the zebra-  
striped swallow-tail of South America  
on whose half-transparent wings, crescents engrave

the silken edge with dragon's blood, weightless? (AG 31)

This repetition could also conserve a trace of the Psyche myth since, as Bonnie Costello reminds us, "Zephyr fathered two horses and a tiger" (2012, 75). Perhaps most striking, however, Moore's rhetorical question tartly rejects the literal zebra in favor of the zebra-resembling swallowtail. In this way, Plank's metaphorical picture is replaced by an argument for metaphor as such, encapsulated in that short phrase.

While admittedly rhetorical, this question is also an important moment in the poem's initial outreach to its reader. To be sure, the opening of a poem invariably captures the imagination of both critics and poets; John Hollander, for example, has discussed the way that a formal poem establishes a "metrical contract" (1975, 195) with the reader as it begins. For Mary Oliver, "a reader beginning a poem is like someone stepping into a rowboat with a stranger at the oars" (1994, 56). In her distinguishing between literal and metaphorical zebras, and deciding in favor of the



metaphorical at the outset, Moore is introducing the reader to the poem's stakes, even while Plank's pictorial support of the metaphor has gone.

As White observes, Moore's early work globally transitions "from ambiguity to exemplarity" (AG xxi)—a move that is encapsulated by this very rhetorical question, since the swallowtail is portrayed as unsurpassed and thus incomparable. Could exemplarity also contain a skein of metaphor—a zebra stripe of it, if you will? Though the reader's understanding may not be the "instantaneous" one that Warner received from Plank's drawings, it comes early enough in the poem to seed the notion that metaphor constitutes a way of being in the world—or, in the words of Mark Doty, "Metaphor is an act of inquiry (not an expression of what we already know)" (2010, 81). Moore may indeed be more didactic in this version, but in being so, she is also keeping readers closer to the poem's trajectory and offering them a different way of seeing.

For Moore, didacticism is a drive toward inclusiveness: a new welcome of the reader into the poem. She may well have had this idea in mind even from the poem's first appearance in *Direction* in 1935. In all three of its published versions, the first clause of "Half Deity" begins, "We all—infant and adult—have stopped to watch the butterfly" (A-Q 22, 96; and AG 31). In the twenty-first century, we may distrust such reaching toward universality, finding it to stifle differences among persons and cultural traditions. Even so, it is hard to imagine an opening line working any harder to include readers. This opening clause never changes over the course of the poem's revisions, and it may well have provided a groundswell for Moore, who then searched to find ever better ways to include "we all" as the poem progressed. This outreach to the reader drives the revisions more generally, from their omission of literary reference to their embrace of a more generic narrative about desire and its necessarily elusive objects.

Moore's revision of an exclamation later in the poem also speaks to her desire to include the reader in the poem's governing concerns. It speaks as well to her conviction that the reader is, unlike the swallowtail, "teachable." But first, she again emphasizes the superimposition of swallowtail/butterfly and horse/zebra, keeping this metaphorical relationship foregrounded in the reader's mind, much as Plank's illustration did. Without Plank's picture, however, her language will become more insistent. Pangolin's "Twig-veined irascible / fastidious stubborn undisciplined / zebra!" (A-Q 23) becomes, in *What Are Years*, "Equine irascible / unwormlike unteachable butterfly-/zebra!" (AG 32, emphasis mine). While the substitution of "equine" for "twig-veined" makes the description of the metaphorical "zebra" almost



tautological—it becomes a horselike horse—the repetition also reinforces this metaphor's vehicle in the reader's mind. The transformation of "zebra" into the compound "butterfly-zebra" does the same. There can be no escape from the superimposition of metaphor, in other words—even though the poem has no actual illustration to promote, in Warner's terms, such unveiling. Thus "horsiness" is increased in Moore's revision, even though the number of adjectives in the phrase is reduced by one: the adjectival-functioning "butterfly" is converted to the first half of the compound noun "butterfly-zebra," the hyphen here implying the equivalence that metaphor often seeks. This helps to solve the problem that Denis Donoghue articulates: "Some readers hold that the vehicle must count for more than the tenor: if it doesn't redeem the poverty of the tenor, why resort to it?" (2014, 34). The compounded butterfly-zebra provides not only the vertigo of oscillation—which is which?—but also the illusion of a democratic equivalence.

Moore's revisions also help the reader to "envision" description in a different way and thus to imagine the relationship between colors more easily. This is not to say that a reader tracking Moore's revisions might not miss the exquisitely precise delineations in the *Pangolin* version, in which the "more peninsula-tailed" swallowtail has the marvelously juxtaposed "pitchfork scallop-edge on sunburnt zebra skin" (A-Q 22), the image of the sunburnt zebra perhaps nodding to the old joke about the newspaper that is "black and white and *read* all over."<sup>5</sup> The description changes in *What Are Years*: "The north's / yellower swallow-tail with a pitch- / forked-scalloped edge, has tails blunter at the tip" (AG 31). There is arguably a diminution both of wit and of the tactile, unexpected visual material of the first version, which enriches the metonymies of farmers' tools (the pitchfork) and ladies' handkerchiefs (the scallop-edge)—both patterned objects—with the necessary raggedness of landmasses (the peninsula that lends its shape to the swallowtail). In contrast to the crafted regularity of both the "masculine" tool and the feminine decoration, then, the peninsula shape allows a truly organic form: when described in this way, the swallowtail figure has elements of both Aristotelian *techné* and *physis*, as well as metonymic detail characteristic of both its female and male pursuers, Psyche and Zephyr.

What might be gained by losing the compelling visual and even philosophical variegation that "peninsula-tailed" provided? The short answer is that in the new version Moore has created visual contrast instead. Dropping the word "sunburnt" in the previous version (a word



that disappears after its initial appearance in the *Pangolin* edition), Moore introduces and repeats the color yellow in *What Are Years*, rendering it a noun that contrasts to the blue, also presented in nominal form, that the nymph wears:

Its yellowness

that almost counterfeits a leaf's, has just  
now been observed. A nymph approaches, dressed  
in Wedgwood blue, tries to touch it (AG 31)

The element of visual contrast is highlighted here, forming a more dialogic picture in the reader's mind and inciting the *enargia* of vivid mental imaging, a term Richard Lanham defines as corresponding to "unusually powerful, vivid description which re-creates something or someone, as several theorists say, 'before your very eyes'" (1991, 64). While the "sunburnt / peninsula-tailed" description focused more on the swallowtail itself, the new version emphasizes the separateness of the nymph from the butterfly by showing their metonymically corresponding colors as nouns (the nymph is dressed in blue; the swallowtail has "yellowness"), even as the permeability of these two colors is held out as the fantasy of a commingling not entirely unimaginable (if mixed, they would surely form a lovely green). In other words, while the first "sunburnt," peninsular description zeroes microscopically in on the swallowtail, Moore's changes provide a visual "map" of coloration that differentiates the poem's two central players from each other, even while their two corresponding primary colors seem to "wish" for a unification, a mixing—or perhaps a conversation. In Doty's words, such a verbal description works in "the same way a painter energizes one color by placing another beside it, cultivating opposition and tension" (2010, 70).

Moore's choice to describe these colors in nominal form also helps the reader to imagine them without any accompanying illustration. The nouns "yellowness" and "Wedgwood blue" perform what Elaine Scarry discusses as the imagistic "subtraction" (1999, 102) that descriptive writers instruct their readers to perform, thereby encouraging readers' re-creation of mental images. Scarry calls this "the breaking away of color from substance," and she finds an instance of it in Rilke's "Hydrangea," in which "you see / a touching blue's delight in greenness" (Rilke 1984, 113): "At the end of the poem a detached color-patch of blue touches a detached color-patch of green and is suddenly vivified, an event that can be felt in the mind as the caress of one color glances over, touches down on, the



surface of the other" (Scarry 1999, 62). Scarry's language of caress and touch-down echoes Moore's nymph's wish that the swallowtail "touc[h] down on" her finger. It also suggests the imagining reader's desire to fold one color upon the other—blue upon yellow—in a composite mental image. If, as Costello suggests, "everything is gazing" in "Half Deity" (2012, 78)—that is, all actors featured in the poem are gazers—this gazing must surely include the reader as well, in an imaginative sense. As the reader imagines color chasing color, and color resisting color, color itself is endowed with more interactivity than the previous version allowed.

In another move toward lyric autonomy as an instigator of readerly image making, Moore erases the poem's erstwhile relationship to a work of visual art when she republishes it. In *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, Moore includes a note that "Half Deity" references the "Carved Marble Group by Jean Baptiste Boyer (Psyche trying to capture the butterfly held out on Zephyr's palm)" (A-Q 33). This note has been removed from the later publication of the poem, even though Moore retains (with slightly different wording) another note pertaining to Goya. While the removal of the Boyer note doesn't abolish all ekphrastic reference, then, it does lessen the number of visual art objects that are superimposed within this poem's palimpsest. The revision subtracts visual material; this is part and parcel of what Andrew Kappel has called the revisions' "contraction" (AG xiii). But even as it subtracts both an allusion and the poem's association with the hardness of marble, the revision also borrows some degree of monumentality from the stone—much as it intensified, verbally, the work that Plank's illustration was doing visually. In this sense, the revision partakes of the vanished marble's "finished" aspects. Ironically, then, by excising this marmoreal visual intertext, the revision of "Half Deity" supports the New Critical notion of a poem as a freestanding "well-wrought urn"—an approach that Leavell cites as increasingly important to the reception of Moore's work at this time (see Leavell 2013, 346).

Unlike the New Critics, however, Moore also sees lyric autonomy as enabling communication and conversation, beginning with the "we all" opening this poem and reaching its apotheosis in the readings she performed later in her life. In the "piano replies" spoken by both Zephyr and "the zephyr," Moore allegorizes the last step in the trajectory she is paving toward the autonomy of the lyric poem, especially in her revision of "His talk" to "Their talk." In this way, then, Moore renders the lyric poem both an outreach and a means of conversation, much along the lines Johnson pursues in *The Idea of Lyric*. And in the "strangeness" of the shared conversation at the end of the revised "Half Deity"—"Their



talk was as strange as my grandmother's muff" (AG 33)—Moore finds a model for what her own readings would eventually become. As Elizabeth Bishop has said, Moore was uniquely and perhaps oddly gifted in the art of conversation: "She must have been one of the world's greatest talkers: entertaining, enlightening, fascinating, and memorable; her talk, like her poetry, was quite different from anyone else's in the world" (1984, 124).

In another sense, Moore's ending of "Half Deity" is equally "strange" in both versions—since, for the first time, the poem's speaker speaks in the first-person singular ("my grandmother's muff"). This belated entrance of the "I" may seem to show us the inverse of Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar," when the "I" who "placed a jar in Tennessee" (1997, 60) then exits the scene after his initial arrangement of it. But while Stevens's poem is brief, Moore's two versions of "Half Deity" are exactly seventy-seven lines, and in them she has presented an extended scene with a narrative element. This ending, then, is equivalent to the filmic strategy of *suture*, in which a shot is presented to the viewer before being revealed as occurring within a particular character's visual field. (Though the speaker who says "my" may not actually be seeing the scene she describes, the phrase ties the story to her governing consciousness only as the poem ends.)

By switching perspective so abruptly to end the poem—or, more accurately, by belatedly revealing the perspective that had been there all along—both versions of Moore's poem call the sonnet's *volta* to mind. In its brevity, Moore's last line also recalls the post-*volta* closing couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet form in particular. As frequently seen in the endings of Moore's later poems, the line is both a summation and a judgment, much as the "philosophical" endings of Shakespeare's sonnets often switch the tone of the more personal three quatrains that precede them. For Helen Vendler, the Shakespearean closing couplet, and its "turn toward the proverbial," signals a speaker turning to "the common wisdom" about a particular subject, and thus such a couplet "should be uttered with implied quotation marks around each of its proverbial sayings" (1997, 26). Such a turn to the proverbial happens in shorthand at the end of "Half-Deity," but for Moore the personal possessive pronoun pronounces the judgment that in the Shakespearean sonnet often exits the realm of the personal altogether.

Unlike its role in Shakespeare's sonnets, then, the personal pronoun provides Moore a way *out* of the poem. In "Half Deity," the possessive pronoun is so fleet, and its reference so exiguous, that it nearly disguises the deictic personal history that could be unfolded by the grandmother's metonymic "muff." But nor does its introduction obviate the aphoristic,



potentially epigrammatic quality of the line, which is joined by several other epigrammatic-sounding lines throughout both versions of the poem: "They that have wings must not have weights" (*AG* 32); "Butterflies do not need / home advice"; "Sometimes one is grateful to / a stranger for looking very nice." (Even the opening "We all, infant and adult, have stopped to watch the butterfly" [31] could qualify as a statement that is leaning precariously toward the epigrammatic.) The weight of these sentences is further signaled by their immovability within both versions of the poems: Moore alters neither the wording nor the line breaks in any of these epigrammatic statements, though at times she has appended a clause or an elaboration afterward. In this way, the two versions of the poem reveal the aphoristic or epigrammatic aspects of the poem to be its "riprap," in Gary Snyder's terms: the stone pathway that the poet-trailblazer lays for footing: "Lay down these words / Before your mind like rocks / placed solid" (1992, 21).

Such contraction becomes a drive both to simplify and to solidify. In Smith's words, "To epigrammatize an experience is to strip it down, to cut away irrelevance, to eliminate local, specific, and descriptive detail, to reduce it to and fix it in its most permanent and stable aspect, to sew it up for eternity" (1968, 208). As Moore revises "Half-Deity," she accomplishes many of the things on Smith's list. By eliminating or demoting proper names, for example, she has eliminated specific detail and has arguably sewn up a more "eternal" or less specifically allusive version of the story. But she has also balanced these moves, and her epigrammatic sentences, with the descriptive detail for which she is so celebrated. The details might have changed, but the rich visual information abides and even intensifies, as we have seen.

In these revisions, Moore never allows the epigrammatic to win out over "local" quantities of visual description. But the seesaw struggle is there, and it lends perennial unrest to a poem that remains neither all surface nor all pith. In short, the drive that made Moore revise "Poetry" to three lines is perhaps what Vendler elsewhere calls "the temptations that the poet's mind encounters along the way (for example, a temptation to sentimentality), and how these are staved off or (in some cases) yielded to" (2004, 39). And in her 1949 essay "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto," Moore beautifully encapsulated such a struggle between terse epigram and expansive description: "When I am as complete as I like to be, I seem unable to get an effect plain enough" (*CPr* 420).

Oddly enough, the ideal synthesis of these varying drives—toward exhaustive description and, conversely, the limitations of the



epigrammatic—may have been found in the person of Moore herself, as she came to be a celebrated performer of her own work in the latter part of her life. The “strange” talk—as strange as anachronistic or “muffling” clothing—not only referred to her idiosyncratic talent as a conversationalist but also created her very voice as a poet on the page, as Bishop suggests: “She looked like no one else; she talked like no one else; her poems showed a mind not much like anyone else’s; and her notions of meter and rhyme were unlike all the conventional notions—so why not believe that the old English meters that seem natural to most of us . . . were not natural to her at all? That Marianne from birth, physically, had been set going to a different rhythm?” (1984, 139). As a performer, Moore combined such idiosyncratic prosody with the “quaintness,” in Bishop’s terms, of her person and clothing, becoming a celebrity reader of her poetry in the fifties and sixties. With her black cape and tricorn hat, looking older than her years, Moore probably seemed as “strange” as any grandmother’s outmoded accessory. Fascinatingly, however, this strangeness was not to suffer the desuetude Stevens showed as the fate of Plato’s winged chariot. Instead, Moore transformed her anachronism into an extraordinarily well-received “intellectual *chic*” (2010, 191), showcasing what Leavell calls “the elusive personality trait now called charisma” (2013, 344) and even being featured in *Life* magazine in 1953 as a “Famous Poet” (349).

If such press is any indication, Moore had become a cultural icon—and, in Leavell’s words, “cultural icons were as readily consumed by postwar society as were no-iron fabrics and panty girdles” (344). But Moore was not only a “consumed” commodity; she was also her own purveyor and, in Gregory’s terms, cannily subversive of the celebrity status that she herself had cultivated: “Calmly extraordinary, she often dressed like George Washington in tricorn and cape, with a silver-dollar clasp, raising questions about her and her audience’s ‘identities’—as Americans, as gendered and racialized people, as spenders of dollars, as people of a particular age—just by entering a room” (2015, 760). But Moore read few of her earlier poems at the readings for which she would be celebrated.

Though it would be decades before Moore’s “strange talk” would become so popular, “Half-Deity” concludes with that very talk, its revised version introducing a new first-person pronoun. If read in conjunction, the poem’s two versions become a journey toward Moore’s full embodiment as a performer both full of strangeness and, in Warner Moore’s words, “loved” (quoted in Leavell 2013, 347) for that very quality. In a way, then, Moore’s own career “finished” the metapoetic blueprint outlined in “Half Deity.” If the poem was a form of self-instruction—as, for example, Vendler



has sometimes read certain poems of Stevens—Moore evidently reached a point where she could dispense with the instruction manual.

In its liberation of poem from accompanying illustrations and from ekphrastic reference, its celebration of metaphor as a way of seeing the world, its reduction of proper names, its insistence on the epigrammatic, and its concluding “talk,” Moore’s “Half Deity” allegorizes her career’s new embrace of lyric, or what Johnson has discussed as the “I-Thou” relationship that the poet-performer both created and enjoyed in the Western classical world:

The most usual mode in Greek lyric (probably) and in Latin lyric (certainly) was to address the poem (in Greek, the song) to another person or to other persons. . . . What this typical lyric form points to is the conditions and purposes of song: The presence of a singer before his audience, his re-creation of universal emotions in a specific context . . . and, finally, *the sharing, the interchange of these emotions by singer and audience.* (1982, 4, emphasis mine)

That Moore’s poems were actually *not* very much like song, that she retained a great deal of their strangeness even as she revised them in ways that frustrated her more intellectually minded critics, makes her late embrace of this model the more remarkable. It speaks to the way her work, and her performance of it, not only contributed to literary modernism but also changed the scope of what lyric communication could be in the twentieth century. Again in the words of Bishop, “I think (a simple thought) she must represent reassurance to all the audiences who hear her—a kind of family-feeling” (2010, 190–91). This family feeling echoes Johnson’s description of “interchange” as integral to the lyric performance, or the “piano replies” of Zephyr/the zephyr in “Half Deity.”

Thus it is not quite accurate to speak of Moore as a poet in a state of perpetual, experimental revision. If we are to glean a metapoetic portrait of her, as unpublished or republished materials often seem to ask us to do, we can instead see the early work as the means of a teleological process toward traditional lyric goals, in which both the aphoristic and a complexity of description can coexist in a public performance. Thus the “end” of revision is potentially the most unstable place of all: the volatility, and variability, of oral transmission. Lyric, though, has always provided its own script for those occasions. In Moore’s case, the script was both singular and traditional: the Janus face of the retroactive and the avant-garde, as embodied in the unique fashion and intellect of her person and her poems.





Christina Pugh is the author of four books of poems, including *Perception* (2017) and *Grains of the Voice* (2013). Her poems have appeared in the *Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, and other periodicals, and in anthologies such as *Poetry 180* (2003). Her essays on poetry and poetics have appeared in *Poetry*, *Emily Dickinson Journal*, *The Cambridge Companion to Poetry since 1945*, and other periodicals and anthologies. She is professor in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and consulting editor for *Poetry*.

## Notes

1. Abbreviations refer to these Moore texts: *CPr*, *Complete Prose* (1986); *BMM*, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002); *A-Q*, *A-Quiver with Significance* (2008); and *AG*, *Adversity and Grace* (2012).
2. Domhnall Mitchell's *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (2005) and Cristanne Miller's *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (2012) have emphasized the sonic aspects of Dickinson's poetry, providing a needed rejoinder to other Dickinson manuscript scholars' visual focus.
3. According to Mac Barrick, "The joking question 'What's black and white and red all over?' with the answer 'A newspaper' is perhaps the most common example of a folk riddle collected in the United States in the twentieth century. It appeared in fifteen collections of riddles compiled between 1917 and 1939" (1974, 254).

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# Moore, Pound, Syllabics, and History

Fiona Green

In Ezra Pound's well-known account of the ideogrammic method, five words stand for the "abbreviated pictures" that register a thought signified in English by the abstraction "red":

ROSE

CHERRY

IRON RUST

FLAMINGO

"A language written in this way," says Pound, in pictures of things or groups of things sharing a common quality, "simply . . . couldn't help being and staying poetic in a way that a column of English type might very well not stay poetic" (1934, 22). Pound first published Ernest Fenollosa's "Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" in 1919 and returned to it in his *ABC of Reading* in 1934. In that rendering, quoted here, page space and capitals restore some of the thingness that's lost in the translation from ideogram to English type. Yet to dwell on the material particulars of the English words—to notice their letters—would be to miss Pound's point, which is the paradoxical concreteness and transparency of Chinese "words," whose readers do not so much read as "look" and immediately "know" when they see the pictogram FLAMINGO. In 1916, a flamingo had drifted briefly into Marianne Moore's "Critics and Connoisseurs": "I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford," she writes, "with flamingo-colored, maple- / leaflike feet" (*BMM* 77).<sup>1</sup> The flamingo is there primarily, as it is in Fenollosa and Pound, to lend color, yet its stubborn birdness along with the maple leaf also makes of Moore's swan an ungainly avian-botanical composite. Most importantly for the purposes of this article, "Critics and Connoisseurs" prompts us to see the syllabic stuff of which "flamingo" itself is composed. In a poem that begins by listing "Certain Ming / products, imperial floor coverings of coach- / wheel yellow," "flamingo" refers back, by the



accident of its middle syllable, to the collectibles assembled in that first stanza, and these, along with the “plate” at its end and the swan under the willows, combine to produce a version of willow pattern. Whereas Pound mystifies the Chinese character and the poetry it inspires by insisting on its immediacy, Moore’s verse, in making us notice its syllables, brings accidents of transmission into the service of poetic thought, in this case, as it happens, about ersatz reproductions of the Orient.

“The Chinese ‘word’ or ideogram for red is based on something everyone KNOWS,” wrote Pound, and added, in parentheses, “If ideogram had developed in England, the writers would possibly have substituted the front side of a robin” (1934, 22). A year later, Marianne Moore composed “Virginia Britannia,” a poem about the colonization of North America that listed “the redbird” among its native fauna. This article is about a preoccupation with nation-building narratives that Moore and Pound shared in the 1930s. Its focus is *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936), the book in which “Virginia Britannia” appeared, and an exchange of letters between the two poets that took place in 1935, partway through Moore’s work on that book. My concern is the intricate relationship for each poet between the composition of poetry and the fabric of history. The central claim of this article is that whereas Pound detects the rhythmic coherence of a robust economy beneath the surface differences of documented history, Moore’s attention to the syllabic material of the prose she read trained her attention on the contingent aspects of historical narrative, and on the accidental likenesses whereby nations make themselves up.

Moore’s experiments with syllabics in the 1910s may have been prompted in part by the vogue among the imagist poets for syllabically controlled Japanese forms such as the haiku. When she returned to syllabic stanzas in the 1930s she had also developed a “hybrid method of composition” that had its fullest expression in long free-verse poems such as “An Octopus” and “Marriage,” poems made up almost entirely of quotations from prose sources.<sup>2</sup> As I have suggested briefly elsewhere, when syllabics and quotation come together in the densely worked stanzas of the 1930s, Moore’s method of composition is inextricably bound up with a reading practice habitually distracted by the material components of prose (see Green 2015, 38–40). The thought developed in this article is that the practical work of counting syllables makes Moore into a particularly fidgety reader. If you settle to the kind of work that she must have done by taking any syllabic poem (“The Fish,” “The Steeple-Jack,” “The Pangolin”) and checking its line lengths, and then,



after five or ten minutes, stop counting syllables and read some prose—a newspaper, a cereal packet, the minutes of a meeting (the less “poetic” the better)—something strange will happen. The surface of the writing will be animated with likenesses, with the kinds of accidental pattern that lurk in the most prosaic of texts waiting for a distractible reader like Moore to find them. Take, for example, this passage from the journal *Natural History*:

Though there are many animals in the world known as anteaters, the pangolins are apparently the only creatures which specialize in eating true ants, the other “anteaters” preferring the less dangerous antlike termites. But, in Africa at least, the pangolins fear no ant, sometimes going deliberately after army ants, insects which, though small, are formidable for their aggressiveness and great numbers. The formic acid carried into the skin by an ant bite is so unpleasant that we may well imagine the taste for ants must have been a long time in acquisition. (Hatt 1934, 725, 728)

Notice—this is what you *would* notice if you had been counting syllables—all the *ans* and *ants*, the stammer in “an ant bite,” the ant carried in “unpleasant,” and the one heard if not seen in “apparently”; spot the “eat” at the heart of “creatures” and “great,” the “gre” common to “great” and “aggressiveness,” and the syllable shared by “formidable” and “formic.” At the same time, something happens to sense: once occupied at the prose surface collecting and connecting *ans* and *ants*, *eats* and *forms*, the reader attentive to syllables will almost certainly lose track of what the prose says. Of course this is to overread the natural history passage, but my purpose in thus misreading it is to illustrate that for Marianne Moore two aspects of composition, counting syllables and reading prose, are inextricably conjoined, and that the product of their marriage is not just verse that sounds prosy because the ear accustomed to accentual rhythms is deaf to units measured by syllable count, but prose whose constituents come to its surface and, in forming a diversion from what the writing says, participate in the revived materiality that animates poetic language.

“The pangolin,” writes Robert Hatt, assistant curator in the department of mammals at the American Museum of Natural History, “has indeed a leafy appearance that has caused visitors to my office, when seeing a curled up skin fresh from the field, to enquire whether the object was an artichoke or a pine cone” (1934, 725). Under Moore’s curation, this creature, easily mistaken for other things, converts readily into a poem whose syllabic medium tempts us to construe accidental



likeness as motivated connection or natural kinship. When we read in the poem's first stanza about "this near artichoke," the sense of the verse—that a pangolin looks a bit like an artichoke and a bit like a pine cone—gets sidetracked by the proximity of "artichoke" to "artist" (A-Q 27), kin in sharing a syllable. "The Pangolin" thus begins as a poem about mistaken identity, its first stanza posing a question about lineage ("[The pangolin] is Leonardo's / indubitable son?"). I will go on to suggest that the sources of this poem also prompted Moore's thinking about lineage and likeness in the context of American history, a concern most fully articulated in "Virginia Britannia," the late addition to *The Pangolin and Other Verse* that gave that book its eventual starting point.

The source material for "The Pangolin" was not confined to zoology. Moore's published notes credit one line—"a sailboat was the first machine"—to "*Power* by F. L. Morse." *Power* is a small pamphlet about engineering and the part that technology has played in the progress of nations. "From the beginning of history," writes Morse, "the growth or degree of civilization of a race or nation can be determined by their development and application of power transmission" (1923, 2). Moore acknowledges her borrowing from this early passage: "Under the old kingdom of Egypt . . . there was only one power, with the exception of muscular strength, which was plied to anything that might be considered a machine, and the machine was the sailboat" (3), though she does not identify the forebear of her "artist- / engineer, . . . Leonardo" (A-Q 27) in Morse's "Leonardo da Vinci who was not only one of the world's greatest artists but the greatest engineer and inventor of this period" (1923, 21). Morse's tale of technological inventiveness advances swiftly to the machineries that drive the modern nation state, taking in, for example, the furnaces in which arms for the War of Independence were manufactured. After thirty-nine pages and roughly six thousand years of technological ingenuity, this is where *Power* ends up: "All of these epoch-making inventions in prime movers and their applications to machines, created revolutionary demands in power transmission. In one way or another these involved the transmission of great power at a controlled and often high speed, in a small space, and without noise. This has led to combinations of steel link belts and sprockets. The Rocker Joint of these so-called silent chains was invented by Morse in 1901" (39). This pamphlet tells the most conspicuously end-directed of stories. A transcript of Frank Lincoln Morse's address to the 16th annual mining convention



in Milwaukee, and published by his own Morse Chain Company, it's a history of power designed to end with his invention, in 1901, of the silent, frictionless, rocker-jointed Morse chain. The Egyptian sailboat, Leonardo's linked sprocket chains (figure 1), the first ironworks in colonial Virginia—all of these were but steps on the road to the rocker joint. Marianne Moore makes something of these so-called silent chains in her pangolin poem:

Pangolins are  
not aggressive animals; between  
dusk and day, they have the not un-  
chainlike machine-  
like form and  
frictionless creep of a thing  
made graceful by adversities (A-Q 29)

Among the things that "The Pangolin" carries in its makeup, then, is a whiggish history, a narrative of power that has at its beginning and its end a silent mechanism—a sailboat and a frictionless chain—strange replicas of the pangolin, an armored animal, says Moore, "made / for moving quietly," and of the silent formal machinery whereby that creature is articulated in the verse.

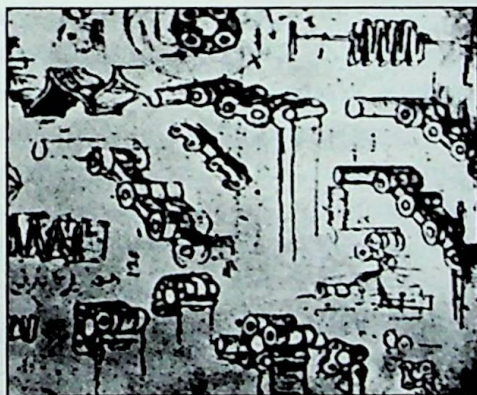


Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci "Codice Atlantico" (1484). In Morse 1923, 22.

This reading of "The Pangolin" makes explicit two kinds of poetic thinking. One of them, distracted by the medium of transmission, is captivated by verbal pattern and coincidence and goes skittering across the written surface in the kind of lateral movement that's activated by Moore's syllabics. Set against that diverted attention is a more strictly linear kind



of thought, in the case of the pamphlet about power, a narrative that is resolutely end-directed—the kind of history whose quiet machinery marshals all contingencies into the service of its advancing plot. In the 1930s, when retellings of US history in print and in the curated landscape became pressing cultural concerns, and personal preoccupations of Marianne Moore's, these two modes of attention competed in her reading and writing about the origins and history of her own nation.

Moore published "The Pangolin" as the last poem in *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936), where it followed four poems grouped under the heading "The Old Dominion." The book opens with "Virginia Britannia," the last of the Old Dominion poems to be written and, as Heather White shows in meticulous detail, the poem that "turn[ed] what might have been a book of unrelated animalies into a more ambitious and pointed statement of Moore's thinking about the intersection of her roles as poet and American citizen" (A-Q xix). A number of suggestions have been made about thematic continuities between the Old Dominion poems and "The Pangolin." Moore's "armored animal," for example, "who endures / exhausting solitary / trips through unfamiliar ground" (27), might be a match for her "able / sting-ray-hampered pioneer" Captain John Smith (14).<sup>3</sup> My reading of the source material indicates a still closer affinity between these two poems that goes back to a common point of origin. Among the primary sources for "The Pangolin" was Richard Lydekker's entry under "MANIS" in the *Royal Natural History*. Like Robert Hatt, Lydekker comments on the pangolin's resemblance to "an animated spruce-fir cone furnished with a head and legs" (1894-95, 3:226), thereby supplying Moore with the *ans* that proliferate in the first stanza of her poem. She probably also noticed that pangolins belong to the Old World: "As already mentioned, the relationship of the [African and Asian] pangolins to the typical New World Edentates is remote; and it may even be questioned whether the group is rightly included in the same order. Their internal anatomy is of a different type; and the joints of the backbone lack the additional articular processes characterising most of the American Edentates." Moore was well aware that an edentate is an animal lacking teeth, but her restless eye was surely caught by the happy accidents of "*New World Edentate*," and "*American Edentate*." Here also, then, may be a starting point for Moore's poem about national origins, and in particular about remote likenesses between England and the New World's Old Dominion, Virginia. Moore's other edentate expert, Robert



Hatt, points out that African pangolins are rarely seen in American zoos because they do not survive well in captivity. He goes on: "The suggestion was once made that they might profitably be imported to the tropics of the New World to fight the destruction of fruit trees by leaf cutting ants" (1934, 732). Captive labor transported from Africa to cultivate the New World is also, of course, integral to the fabric of colonial Virginia, and troubling to the composition of "Virginia Britannia."

Marianne Moore and her mother spent the summers of 1934 and 1935 with her brother Warner, a navy chaplain recently returned from overseas and stationed for three years in Portsmouth, Virginia. All four poems in the Old Dominion sequence were composed during and between these visits, with "Jamestown," later called "Virginia Britannia," drafted in the summer of 1935. The previous year, the Moores had been among 30,000 tourists who visited Colonial Williamsburg to see work in progress on the restoration of the eighteenth-century town. Moore wrote to Bryher on August 27:

Last week we drove to Williamsburg to see the Rockefeller restorations—the Capitol and Governor's Palace. These colonial grandeurs and simplicities would not have excited you as much as they did us, but it was valuable and romantic in our eyes; the "strong sweet prison" with a shingle roof, and immense mulberry trees for colonial silk-worms, etc., in rebellious Yorktown! by way of which we came home. We had visited Warner in Yorktown in 1927 and had then gone to Williamsburg but some things keep on improving. Though if anyone could be inclined to think so, we are the ones to think that Yorktown was a mistake. (SL 329)

In Moore's "some things keep on improving" there's a reminder that other things do not—that much has changed in the national landscape since 1927, and that the National Park Service's reconstructed earthworks and eighteenth-century buildings at Jamestown and Yorktown, like the philanthropically funded restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, took place against the background of the Depression. Luke Carson has written about Moore's civic republican view of "enforced idleness" (2002, 324) during the 1930s; in her poetic reconstruction of colonial history, "excellent idleness" (A-Q 18) is particular to the plantation South, and also, perhaps, a reflection on the privileged leisure time that she and her mother enjoyed as visiting tourists.



Moore's letter to Bryher makes light of their transatlantic difference: "colonial grandeurs" might not have been so impressive to an English heiress, and if by "Yorktown was a mistake" Moore pretends affectionately to regret the outcome of the Revolutionary War, it could not have escaped her attention that the venue selected for the surrender of Cornwallis to Washington was the Moore House at Yorktown, which was restored and dedicated as a national monument in 1934.<sup>4</sup> The "strong sweet prison" and the mulberry trees at Jamestown eventually find their way into "Virginia Britannia," and the hard work on the Old Dominion poems that Moore undertook between the two Virginia summers comes through meanwhile in a cryptic expletive invented for a letter to Warner. Perplexed by the task of revising her mockingbird poem, "Bird-Witted," she writes to her brother, "Ant-bears alive! Antbears at Williamsburg. Antbears of the Frye's Geography!" (SL 332).<sup>5</sup> The antbear, or anteater, remote cousin to the pangolin, seems here to encode frustrating work on recalcitrant material and offers further evidence that "The Pangolin" belonged somehow, in Moore's mind, with the beginnings of the nation. Perhaps the most telling phrase in the letter to Bryher is that Williamsburg "was valuable and romantic in our eyes." As we shall see, work in progress on the Rockefeller restorations prompted Moore to think of a national narrative as a special kind of construction, and of the story of Virginia as a species of romance.<sup>6</sup>

In January 1935, the winter between her trips to Portsmouth, Moore received several letters from Ezra Pound haranguing her about economics. A typical example ends:

Work is not a commodity.

Money is not a commodity.

The STATE *has* credit. Just as I have credit at the Albergo Rapallo. Can eat for three months without paying. I don't have to go to bank, borrow money, pay interest on it in order to lunch and dine

[hand-written] *usury*

when yew git that thaaat last sentence/ you'll be a long way to understanding why hoover is a hog/ and the present administration just WEAK from the cervix upward. (1935c)

These slogans are the persistent refrains of Pound's letters in the years following his brief audience with Mussolini (1933) and his



self-appointment to the role of court poet to *Il Duce*. He wrote dozens of letters like this to friends and associates and to public figures, promulgating social credit and fulminating against the banks. He circulated the lines beginning “Work is not a commodity” also in *Social Credit: An Impact*, his 1935 contribution to a series of pamphlets on the new economics published by Stanley Nott, the London publisher of C. H. Douglas. There’s no mistaking the invective against usury, which increases in volume and viciousness in letters like this one, as also in Pound’s poetry of the period, most notoriously in Canto 45, “With Usura. . .” (see Pound 1995, 229–30). The swipe against Hoover is more specific to the correspondence with Moore, whose support for the beleaguered former president has been well documented.<sup>7</sup> By 1935 Pound has lost patience with “the present administration”: despite Roosevelt’s indictment in his 1933 inaugural of “the unscrupulous money changers” (quoted in Surette 1999, 143) the New Deal had, in Pound’s view, failed because of its “idiotic accumulation of debt” (203) and Roosevelt’s refusal to reform the banks. These are commonplaces, then, in Pound’s correspondence, and they give a sense of the tone and idiom to which Moore was by now accustomed. Pound was, at the same time, keen to promote Moore’s work, asking her several times to offer some critical prose to the *New English Weekly*. Moore suggested sending a poem, and Pound replied, in February 1935:

I don’t know that I want a poem YET, unless you can do a new one, with econ/ consciousness sticking out of it (this izza matr of editn).

Also IF you ever go near a library / can you indicate any BUYABLE works (or worse, unbuyable ditto), throwin light on Financial stimulae of Jeff/Davis, and financing of the confederacy.  
2. were there any abolitionist jews. (1935d)

Leon Surette has dated Pound’s catastrophic turn from zealous economic reformer to anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist to just this moment, the winter of 1934 and the spring of 1935. Pound’s increasingly paranoid understanding of American history, and especially of the causes of the Civil War, was fueled by his reading in Christopher Hollis’s *The Two Nations* (1935) about the indebtedness of southern planters to northern banks, and by a bizarrely conspiratorial article “The Mystery of the Civil War and Lincoln’s Death” by Silver Shirt founder William Dudley Pelley



(see Surette 1999, 241.). These fictions, involving the manipulation of the abolitionist cause by finance capital, lie behind Pound's query to Moore about "abolitionist jews." He poses the same question to William Carlos Williams, to Louis Zukofsky, and most explicitly to Hugo Fack: "Have never been anti-semite, but things do pile up; is there any trace of jews in the abolitionist movement? I doubt. They were all over the south foreclosing mortgages after 1865. No jews in any ECON refo/ or monetary reform" (Pound 1996, 162).<sup>8</sup> In 1935, Marianne Moore knew less than we do about what that question encodes and where it will lead (it was several years before she openly rebuked Pound for his anti-Semitism).<sup>9</sup> She ignored it and replied instead to his other request: "If I go to Norfolk this summer, as I may, I shall write you regarding the Confederacy. There is a fine nest of southern politico-economic and colonial material in a small library at Fort Monroe across the river from Norfolk. My Brooklyn-Oxford surroundings do not yield much; though if anyone at Pratt library should 'push the bashful stranger to his food' your queries will not be deferred" (SL 342). Moore did return to Norfolk in the summer of 1935, and it seems likely that she went to that small library across the river from Norfolk. She didn't, as far as I know, respond further to Pound regarding the Confederacy, but she may well have had his queries in mind when she was drafting her new poem, "Virginia Britannia." It's not a poem with economics sticking out of it, as Pound had wanted, but it is deeply attentive to the fabrication of history, and more conscious than its critics may have realized of the sometimes competing claims of region and nation in the romance narrative of the plantation South:

Pale sand edges England's old  
 dominion. The air is soft, warm, hot,  
     above the cedar-dotted emerald shore  
 known to the redbird,  
     the redcoated musketeer,  
     the trumpet-flower, the cavalier,  
 the parson, and the  
     wild parishioner. A deer-  
     track in a church-floor  
 brick and Sir George Yeardley's  
 coffin-tacks and tomb remain.  
 The now tremendous vine-en-



compassed hackberry  
                   starred with the ivy-flower,  
                   shades the church tower.  
 And "a great sinner lyeth here" under  
                   the sycamore.

A fritillary zigzags  
 toward the seemingly resting-place of this  
                   unusual man and pleasing sinner who  
 "waits for a joyful  
                   resurrection." (A-Q 13)

This is a richly legible space, littered with inscriptions, where you can track intimacies between words in their rearranged letters—as when "parson" persists in "*parishioner*"—and where newcomer might be mistaken for native, redcoat for redbird, because of their deceptive likeness. The line endings of Moore's syllabic stanzas contrive sometimes to rhyme—musketeer-cavalier-deer—while internal patterns also catch the ear to soften those edges of the verse: "cavalier" rhymes not just at the line end with "deer" but also internally with "*Yeardley*," much as the inner pathway near the left margin runs through track-brick-tack-hack and syc. There are more slender threads that look but don't sound like replications (from "redcoated" and "redbird" to "star-red" and "hamper-red"), and "ens" and "and"s seem to drop through the stanza from the first line's "sand" and "England," all these coincidences in the verse catching the restless, zigzagging attention that's cultivated by Moore's syllabics.

Critical responses to this lettered landscape have focused for the most part on the early colonial sources credited in Moore's published Notes to the poem (*Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* [1910] and William Strachey's *History of Travaile into Virginia Britannia* [1849]) and the first-encounter stories they narrate. But what's buried more deeply in the history of the poem's composition is the context in which Moore encountered those early texts, among the southern politico-economic material that she thought might be of particular interest to Pound. Her Reading Diary for 1930–43 includes notes most likely taken at the Hampton public library.<sup>10</sup> References to Werewocomoco, to "Chick a conn," the Powhatan name for the Northern Neck of Virginia, and the phrase "on the Chickahominy," whose rhythmic contour survives in "Virginia Britannia," derive from pamphlets on the historic counties



by W. H. T. Squires, Presbyterian minister and local historian whose sympathies may be discerned in his claim that after the Civil War, "The erstwhile slaves, who were exploited by venal politicians, became again happy and contented laborers" (1935, 7).<sup>11</sup> Moore first came across Strachey's *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia* in a footnote to the *History of Hampton and Elizabeth City County Virginia*, a book dedicated to "The Confederate Veterans of the Peninsula" by Lyon G. Tyler, prolific southern historian and author of *Virginia First*, a pamphlet asserting the primacy of Jamestown over Plymouth as the point of national origin, and vocal proponent of Lee over Lincoln. "The land is fertile, sandy, alluvial and remarkably level," writes Tyler (1922, 9), and his history makes its way further into Moore's poem through its mulberry trees and silkworms.<sup>12</sup>

Moore's reading of the South took more immediate form too. Her Travel Notebook (1935–55) is packed with descriptions of sites such as the Jamestown churchyard she and her mother visited, its detail suggesting note-taking on the spot; but her response to these sites, and to the narrative of the Old Dominion, was also shaped by a tour guide: *Virginia Highway Historical Markers: The Tourist Guide Book of Virginia Featuring the Inscriptions on the Official Markers along the Historic and Romantic Highways of the Mother State* (1931).<sup>13</sup> It begins, "The story of Virginia, however simply told, is one of romance" (1931, 13). According to this account, the history of "this romantic state and its more romantic people" has at its heart the cavalier myth which holds that "the first Virginians," including John Smith, the descendants of noble English houses, transplanted the Old World's feudal power structures in the New: "It came to be that a planter with his family and slaves, living on his vast estate, was like a feudal Baron; the very consciousness of his authority and his proprietary rights inevitably taught him to command, stirred his sense of independence, and ennobled his concepts of life and his manner of living." That sense of independence, fostered in the planter by his isolation, had its legacy in the revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century: "They were aristocrats in England; they were aristocrats here. . . . The attachment to the mother country was everywhere in evidence; but there was brought out in this newer land everything that was essentially and gloriously Anglo Saxon—a planting that when domesticated in this land furnished the rebel that defied the stamp act" (105). This strongly end-directed narrative features in Moore's poem not just by way of "the trumpet-flower, the cavalier" at its start but also in this stanza:



show-mule & witch-cross door & "strong sweet prison"  
are part of what  
    has come about, in the Black  
    idiom, from advancing back-  
ward in a circle;  
    from taking The Potomac  
    cowbirdlike; and on  
The Chickahominy  
establishing the Negro, opportunely brought, to strength-  
en protest against  
    tyranny (A-Q 16)

Critical attention has focused on the 1941 version of these lines, where the negro serves as "inadvertent ally and / best enemy of / tyranny" (AG 42), the consensus being that he does so by the example of his own enslavement and eventual emancipation.<sup>14</sup> But Moore's stanza makes better sense, especially in its earlier version, if it is read in line with the cavalier myth. According to that southern romance narrative, slavery "strength- / en[s] protest" against tyranny not because the slave protests his own freedom but because the feudal structure of which he is an integral part establishes the grounds of the Revolutionary War. Slavery in this view is foundational to the early republic, instrumental in securing the independence of the cavalier planter and, eventually, that of the nation.

"Virginia Britannia," then, may be more accommodating to a specifically southern historiography than has yet been allowed, so that the query for Moore, prompted in part by her correspondence with Pound, is over the integrity of a nation founded on a replicated feudalism and on the crime of chattel slavery. There is a complex layering, in the stanza last quoted, of copying and theft. The cuckoo-like cowbird, for example, hides its eggs in another bird's nest. If it is discovered, it will retaliate by destroying the host's progeny. To take territory "cowbirdlike" is to duplicate what is already a particularly nefarious form of imitation. Advancing backward in the stanza, we come to a still more curious instance of replication and criminality. In August 1935, Moore began recording black speech in her Travel Notebook:

Florence: (the fly) I losed him  
                    (nightgown) I leaved it on the grass  
Nigger John: Well. Fla-ance I'll see you some moe



Florence: All right. Thank you, John

Mr. Duke: a colored man in court.

Witness: I saw him advancing backward in a circle with  
a piece of scantlin' in his hand. (Moore 1935–55, 4v)

Whether the “piece of scantlin” was a makeshift weapon or the spoils of petty theft, “advancing backward” with it sounds like shady behavior. In this third- or fourth-hand report “in the Black / idiom”—the witness statement as recalled by Mr Duke, overheard and transcribed into Moore’s Notebook and transferred to the poem—“Virginia Britannia” could be accused of making light of the crime at the heart of Virginia history, even of turning “advancing back- / ward in a circle” into a kind of burlesque.<sup>15</sup> And if, as critics have sometimes suggested, “advancing backward” has something more serious to say about historical process, it’s hard to know what it stands for.<sup>16</sup> Does the plot of agrarian romance, by reviving Old World feudalism on the Chickahominy, provide the grounds for a forward-looking nation, or is it just a reactionary kind of nostalgia? These questions, and with them the ineradicable history of slavery and of tyranny in the plantation South, were made the more pressing for Moore by her correspondence with Ezra Pound.

While staying with her brother in the summer of 1935, Moore copied the following report from the local newspaper, the *Virginian Pilot*:

4 July 1935

Heavy Losses in Ethiopian Fight. Ethiopia to Concede Nothing to Mussolini, Haile Selassie Says. Emperor Signed Article Charging Italy with Arming Colonies and Provoking Trouble by Frontier Activities. . . .

“Concerning an Armed Italian Protectorate over Ethiopia, an old proverb says ‘One shouldn’t sell the lion’s skin before killing the lion.’”<sup>17</sup>

Why would an article about Mussolini have caught Moore’s attention in the midst of her reading about colonial Virginia? My suggestion is that it’s because Pound’s Italy was on her mind and, along with it, a query over the possibility of benign tyranny. Though the news recorded here from Ethiopia foregrounds resistance to Mussolini’s colonial “adventure” in North Africa, it’s worth remembering that Moore would write to Pound as late as November 1936 that she was reading his *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), which aligns Jeffersonian America with, as Pound saw it, Italy’s benign dictatorship, “a page a day as a kind of ‘daily light’” (SL



370). Could Moore have thought, albeit briefly, that the refinements of plantation life were the products, as she puts it toward the end of “Virginia Britannia,” of “much // kind tyranny” (A-Q 18)? Might she have taken pleasure in the “excellent idleness” and “legitimate laziness” of southern romance, and the objects cultivated by its “tyrant taste”? Tempting though it is to resolve the difficulty of lines like these by assuming that they cannot mean what they say, or that they must be taken ironically, it seems to me that Moore was genuinely ambivalent, in 1935, about the possible kindnesses and comforts of agrarian economies. In its later version all mention of “kind tyranny” and “tyrant taste” has gone from the plantation scene in “Virginia Britannia,” because there is no doubt, by 1941, about where European feudalism and empire building will lead—and no doubt either that Pound’s continued support for Mussolini was a disastrous error of judgment. But in 1935, during the summer before the invasion of Ethiopia, and with Mussolini still enjoying a favorable image in the foreign press, Moore might very well not have thought unconscionable the alignment Pound wanted to propose, between Jeffersonian agrarianism and Mussolini’s “Italy organic, composed of the last ploughman and the last girl in the olive-yards” (Pound 1935a, 34).<sup>18</sup>

If “Virginia Britannia” was in 1935 more accommodating to the cavalier myth than has previously been thought, Moore’s fidgety reading of *Virginia Highway* also prompted a countermovement to the plot of southern historiography. The prefatory story in the book (“Westward the course of empire takes its way” [1931, 13]) is followed by practical instructions on “How to Use” *Virginia Highway*: “You will enjoy reading the inscriptions from this book as you pass the hundreds of markers on your journey over the state” (21). The idea is that the tourist reads the guidebook as she drives the romantic highways of the mother state, matching the text on the page with signs on the road as her journey unfolds. What she will not find in this spatialized encounter with history is a sense of chronology. Instead, she zigzags across time, as, for example on a page from which Moore took some notes, in which the sequence of text dictated by the road map beneath it runs from seventeenth-century Governor Yearley, through a British raid on the town of Suffolk in 1779, to the Confederate siege of Suffolk (1862), before switching back to William Byrd’s survey of the Dismal Swamp in 1728.<sup>19</sup> This spatial arrangement of time gives a more layered account of national and regional narratives than does the shapely cavalier plot. It is this overlaying of different historical moments in the same space that Moore registers in this passage:



## The

rattlesnake soon

said from our once dashing  
undiffident first flag, "don't tread on  
me," tactless symbol of a new republic.

Priorities were

cradled in this region not  
noted for humility; spot  
that has high-singing  
frogs, cotton-mouth snakes and cot-  
ton-fields; (A-Q 17)

Which story has priority in Virginia, *Cradle of the Republic*, as Lyon G. Tyler titled his book? Is it the rattlesnake, symbol of unity among the revolutionary colonies, or cottonmouth, the snake that bears in its name the product of a plantation economy whose coherence, in the end, would depend on resistance to Union? Is there a natural kinship, a line of descent that runs from cottonmouth to rattlesnake, or do they just happen to be found in the same place? It's hard to know in the version of this poem composed in 1935 where Moore's priorities and allegiances lie, but what we can say for certain is that linear narratives give way, in this kind of space, to a more contingent kind of historiography. What I'm also suggesting is that Moore is primed to think about US history in this way partly because of her experience of poetic composition, and of that syllabic environment in which like-sounding words nesting in the same spot might distract you into imagining some motivated connection or causal lineage—that an artist is cousin to an artichoke, a redcoat belongs with a redbird, or that a cottonmouth snake is so called because its habitat is a cotton field.<sup>20</sup>

Ezra Pound's reading of history and economics is quite different, in this respect, from Marianne Moore's. In the mid-1930s he was not detained by the verbal medium of the documents he read. This passage is from Pound's column in the *New English Weekly*, January 1935. He's writing as ever about social credit and about experiments with stamp scrip: "If an ex-engineer [C. H. Douglas], and ex-merchant of surgical implements [Silvio Gesell], in a given lustrum come on the same things that I, with certainly different preparation, am at the same time engaged



in ramming into my cantos, there must be something or other THERE, actual, *sotto-stante*, underneath the urge to get it set down, to get it onto paper, to get it expressed in words: a morale of the epoch" (Pound 1935b, 332). "Something or other THERE, actual, *sotto-stante*, underneath the urge to get it set down, to get it onto paper" insists on intrinsic likenesses that have nothing to do with words.<sup>21</sup> In 1935, at more or less the same time that Moore was composing her Old Dominion and Pangolin poems, Pound was drafting his Fifth Decade, Cantos 42–51. He asked her about the financing of the Confederacy because he was thinking about agrarian economies, about autocratic forms of government, and about artisanal forms of labor. What he was urgently seeking, underneath it all, *sottostante*, was the kind of social organization that could resist the distortions of finance capital—the kind of economy that's immune to the degradations of usury. He found it in the Monte dei Paschi Bank of sixteenth-century Siena, in China, and in the early American republic. Underneath them all, in Pound's understanding, there is something THERE, something actual, and it is something like *rhythm*. This is from *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*:

The real life in regular verse is an irregular movement underlying. Jefferson thought the formal features of the American system would work, and they did work till the time of General Grant but the condition of their working was that inside them there should be a de facto government composed of sincere men willing the national good. When the men of understanding are too lazy to impart the results of their understanding. . . . I don't believe it matters a damn what legal forms or what administrative forms there are in a government. The nation will get the staggers. (Pound 1935a, 95)

What does this profoundly organicist alignment of versification and nation mean for poetic composition? How would the idea that there is some fundamental rhythmic coherence that underlies, as it were, the administrative surface of written language, work in practice? Canto 51, the last of the Fifth Decade, offers a particular angle on this question and brings us full circle if we remember that Moore's pangolin looks like a replica made from other things. Canto 51 sees Pound absorbed by the manufacture of fishing flies, artifacts intricately fashioned from the bodies of other creatures, and, like "The Pangolin" it also shows in detail a passage of verse made up from a body of prose, from Charles Bowlker's *Art of Angling*:



## Blue Dun No 2

This fly is found on most rivers, and is in appearance one of the most delicate insects that frequent the water; and, what is rather extraordinary, it is more numerous, and the fish take it best, in dark cold weather. . . . The wings . . . are to be made of a feather from a starling's wing, or a pale blue feather from under the wing of a duck widgeon . . . a fine blue cock's hackle for legs; the tail is forked, and is to be formed with two fibres from the same feather as the wings are made of; the hook No. 9. It may be used from ten o'clock in the morning till three in the afternoon; but the best time of the day is from twelve till two, particularly in March and April. (97)

This is what Pound makes of Bowlker:

Blue dun; number 2 in most rivers  
for dark days when it is cold  
A starling's wing will give you the colour  
or duck widgeon, if you take feather from under the wing  
Let the body be of blue fox fur, or a water rat's  
or grey squirrel's. Take this with a portion of mohair  
and a cock's hackle for legs.  
12<sup>th</sup> of March to 2<sup>nd</sup> of April (1995, 251)

Pound draws verse out of prose by listening for the ghost of accentual meter, or by finding words and phrases tractable to his own deeply habitual rhythms. Bowlker's "Blue Dun No 2" shifts into "number 2 in most rivers;" "dark cold weather" Pound adjusts to "dark days *when* it is *cold*." He tampers with Bowlker even at the expense of conflating clock time and season: "The best time of day is from twelve till two, particularly in March and April" Pound redrafts as "12<sup>th</sup> of March to second of April" because it makes rhythmic sense.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes he will accept a phrase wholesale—as in "*feather from under the wing*"—because it gathers so readily into that instantly recognizable Poundian signature, reminiscent in cadence of the early cantos: "glitter of sun-rays," "sun-tawny sand stretch," "Pallor of Hesperus," "ply over ply" (1995, 3, 6, 10, 15)—these rhythms stabilize once again in "2 on most rivers"; "when it is cold," "give you the colour." "That hath the light of the doer," says Pound, at the end of the fishing flies passage, "a form cleaving to it."

Readings of Canto 51 have differed in their views of Pound's likely attitude to the making of fishing flies. Robert Demott (1972), for example,



thinks that he admired its precision, care, and seasonality. David Moody, by contrast, thinks of the fishing fly as a dangerous forgery, the work of Geryon made from a heap of corpses (see Moody 2014, 233). Though I tend to concur with Demott's reading, as far as my account of rhythm is concerned, it doesn't matter whether Pound admires the manufacture of fishing flies or reviles it. It's not that rhythmic pattern is a marker, for him, of value—after all, the *Usura Canto* is one of the most rhythmically lovely of all. Still less do I want to claim that versification, be it syllabic as in Moore or accentual-syllabic as in Pound, is the outward code for an ideological position that is portable to other poets and other poems at other times. Rather than signs of this sort, these verse forms seem to me the symptoms of poetic consciousness, precipitations and provocations of their makers' ways of reading and thinking. It's intriguing to speculate about what Moore might have done with *The Art of Angling*. Perhaps she would have noticed *forked* and *formed*, *starling* and *wing*; where Pound listens to prose for echoes of his own rhythms, or reorganizes syntax to bring words into line with them, Moore might have glanced across from "fox" to "cocks" to "o'clock"; she would have been hooked at the surface of the writing, by the syllables and the letters that make them. Pound wants to "get it set down, to get it onto paper," and yet somehow also to bypass his own written medium, to put himself onto the page in all his rhythmic irregularity, and to have history reveal itself despite the accidents of its transmission. What I've been suggesting about Marianne Moore is that, because she counted syllables, she couldn't *not* see them—she couldn't see through or put aside what we might call the administrative surface of the prose she read or the stanzas she composed. The likenesses, patterns, and coincidences that catch the ear and eye in her syllabic verse do not reveal any deeper organic coherence, less still the lineaments of conspiracy. Likewise perhaps, for Marianne Moore, American history and even nations themselves are intricately bound up with the accidents of their transmission.

## §

Fiona Green is senior lecturer in American literature at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Jesus College. She has published widely on Moore and other American poets, in *Critical Quarterly*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Symbiosis*, *Journal of American Studies*, *Genre*, and *TLS*. Her edited collection *Writing for the New Yorker* appeared in 2015.



## Notes

1. Abbreviations refer to these Moore texts: *CPo*, *Complete Poems* (1981); *SL*, *Selected Letters* (1997); *BMM*, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002); *A-Q*, *A-Quiver with Significance* (2008); and *AG*, *Adversity and Grace* (2012).
2. Moore refers to her “hybrid method of composition” in the “Note on the Notes” (*CPo* 262).
3. This suggestion is Benjamin Johnson’s (2007, 139).
4. The restoration of the Moore House was completed, and the house formally dedicated, on October 18–19, 1934, the 153rd anniversary of Cornwallis’s surrender to Washington and just two months after the Moores’ visit to Yorktown.
5. The anteater appears in Frye’s 1902 *Complete Geography*, 113.
6. White and Carson (2011) discuss in detail the treatment of literary romance and chivalry in Moore’s 1932 poem “The Hero.”
7. Carson (2002) discusses Hoover as the embodiment of civic virtue for Moore in 1932.
8. Pound asks the question of Williams in a letter of February 16, 1935 (see Pound 1996, 162). For the December 1934 letter to Hugo Fack, see Hugh Witemeyer’s note to the same letter. For the May 1934 letter in which the question about abolitionist Jews is posed to Zukofsky, see Pound 1987, 157–60.
9. For the larger context of Moore’s correspondence with Pound, see Bar-Yaacov 1988. Bar-Yaacov discusses Moore’s “silent disagreement with Pound over his attitudes towards the Jews” in 1933–34, focusing especially on his anti-Semitic jibes against Bryher: “It was not until 1939 . . . that Moore finally referred openly to Pound’s scurrilous attack” (520–22) on her close friend.
10. The Hampton Public Library, opened in 1926, fits Moore’s description to Pound of a “small library across the river from Norfolk.” Its catalogue includes copies of Smith 1910, Tyler 1922, Virginia Conservation 1931, and Virginia Navigation Co. 1902, the books from which Moore took notes in her Reading Diary 1930–43, printed dates September 1–18, 1923. Moore used old diaries for note-taking, in this case a diary from 1923. “Printed dates” are used in this and all subsequent references as page locators. They do not refer to the dates on which the notes were taken.
11. See Reading Diary 1930–43, printed dates August, 29–31 1923.



12. Moore's notes from Tyler appear in her Reading Diary 1930–43, printed dates September 11–13, 1923, the reference to Strachey on September 11, and that concerning the colonists' planting of mulberry trees and grapevines on September 12 (see Tyler 1922, 16).

13. Moore's notes from *Virginia Highway* appear in her Reading Diary 1930–43, printed dates September 1–2, 1923.

14. Cristanne Miller, for example, writes, "Moore sees the seeds of tyranny's downfall in the slavery which embodied one of its worst exploitations of power: although 'inadvertent ally' in enslaved service, 'the negro' is also 'best enemy of / tyranny'" (1995, 152); for Bonnie Costello, "In their later resistance blacks are indeed 'inadvertent ally and best enemy of tyranny'" (2003, 113). Though my reading of these lines differs from hers, my larger argument does concur with Costello's claim that for Moore "history is not heroic narrative nor divine fiat but a set of contingencies" (107).

15. I am indebted to Stacy Hubbard for the suggestion, in conversation, that "advancing backward in a circle" might look like a cakewalk.

16. The most comprehensive reading of these lines, and of the larger conception of history in "Virginia Britannia," is still John Slatin's (1986). In Slatin's view, Moore attempts to rectify the "circular logic of American history" "by accept[ing] the very principles she is trying to correct" (1986, 246), especially those of imitation and appropriation. My argument differs most widely from Slatin's on the subject of syllabics. Whereas for Slatin Moore's verse form is essentially imitative (206), the suggestion of this article is that its lateral patterns disrupt linear historiography.

17. Reading Diary 1930–43, printed date August 26–27.

18. For the favorable foreign press that Mussolini enjoyed between the march on Rome (March 1922) and the Ethiopian war (October 1935), see Surette 1999, 72.

19. Moore's notes from this page (*Virginia Highway* 159) appear in Reading Diary 1930–43, printed date September 1, 1923.

20. There are various possible derivations of the name "cotton mouth": *cotton* might be a corruption of the Greek name *angkistrodon*, from *ancistro* (hooked) and *odon* (tooth); or it may simply refer to the white interior of the snake's mouth. In neither case does it have to do with cotton fields.

21. The premise of *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* is likewise that "the fundamental likenesses between these two men are probably greater than their differences" (Pound 1935a, 11). Pound goes on: "I am not diddling about with a paradox.



The top dressing could hardly be more different, everything on the surface is different. The verbal manifestations or at least the more greatly advertised verbal manifestations undoubtedly differ to a very great degree."

22. These changes are visible in close-up in Pound's hand corrections to a typed draft of Canto 51, where he types "12 to 2, March and April," and revises in pencil to "12 of March" (Pound n.d.).

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# “Spenser’s Ireland,” December 1941:

## Scripting a Response

Edward Allen

It has been noticed before that words require expert handling in theaters of war. That truth has come home to us in new and appalling ways in the wake of hostilities and regime change in the Middle East: dossiers have been *sexed up*, interrogation techniques *enhanced*, *bottom-up reconciliation* puffed up to do the work of diplomacy. Such “swindles and perversions,” as George Orwell once put it ([1946] 2000, 353), have prompted a new wave of linguists to probe and puncture the soft play of euphemism and to scrutinize all over again the various kinds of drifting, bleaching, borrowing, and compounding that typify semiotic procedure when language is conscripted.<sup>1</sup> *Collateral*, now, will be forever bound to *damage*, no matter how many words you slot between them.

Heartened, certainly, by this renaissance in the field of lexical semantics, language philosophers of a more pragmatic disposition have shown a fresh concern for what we might call the performativity of warspeak—a true Orwellian bit of jargon, and one that sets the tone for this essay. Picking the plumpest euphemism is important to those who dictate foreign policy, critics agree, but the difference between inciting feeling and effecting action is not just semantic, for there is an illocutionary distinction to be drawn between warmongering and war declaring, between the gravity of a speech and the weight of a speech act. Declaring war is a delicate business, as Brien Hallett (2012) reminds us—a business that relies on an exact coincidence of intonation, circumstance, and perceived authority—which makes it all the more surprising that rhetoricians have not always shown due regard for the conditions of political utterance:<sup>2</sup>



Since Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor had created a state of war, President Roosevelt's message needed only to be a statement of that fact. But it was much more: with his skill in radio speaking the Commander-in-Chief welded a nation of listeners into a single great weapon of determined effort for victory. Note the simplicity, directness, and moral force of his words. (Packard [1948] 1951, 87)

When Frederick Packard Jr. resolved in 1948 to produce an edition of "short speeches that have shaped our destiny," he did so knowing that readers would buy his book not to hear his take on the speeches but to hear the speakers speaking for themselves. There is a sort of repressed enthusiasm, then, about blurbs like this one—a preface to Roosevelt's address to Congress on December 8, 1941—such that one might spot in Packard's fleeting display a will to say something memorable at the expense of factual accuracy. It is true, in one sense, that the bombardment of Pearl Harbor had "created a state of war" in December 1941, but Packard distorts the evidence when he intimates that Roosevelt had had nothing more to do the following morning than impart a status report. For while he'd certainly hoped in the space of those precious six minutes to rally his audience and to revamp himself as "Commander-in-Chief," Roosevelt in fact had intended to do both more and less than his listeners had come to expect of their president, first by pointing out to them that "the facts of yesterday speak for themselves," and then by declining to allow those "facts" the final say by deferring to the good sense of the nation's representatives: "I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December seventh, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire."

And there the broadcast had reached its conclusion—at 12:36 p.m. (EST)—not with Roosevelt's declaration of war, as the history books have sometimes claimed, but with a firm appeal to his colleagues to exercise their own illocutionary powers. Seven years on, Packard sidesteps this crucial directive and prompts his readers instead to appreciate once more the late president's "skill in radio speaking" and to "note the simplicity, directness, and moral force of his words." To do so, then and now, is not only to gloss over the dicey quality of public warspeak, and so to disregard the fine line Roosevelt treads between performance



and performativity. It might also be to underestimate the sort of work that went into crafting his latest radio turn—the sort of work (typically accomplished behind the scenes) that has to do with cultivating certain kinds of *indirection* and with assembling layers of implication that allowed him, on this and other occasions, to make his listeners think, and think again. We now know what Packard could only have imagined in 1948, which is that Roosevelt's address to Congress had undergone painstaking revision in the hours leading up to its performance. Having dictated the first draft to his secretary, Grace Tully, on the evening of December 7, Roosevelt had taken it upon himself to pencil in some amendments—adding, crossing out, rewording, updating—ostensibly without the help of his usual aides.<sup>3</sup> Among the most striking of these amendments was Roosevelt's adjustment of the key opening phrase—turning “a date that will live in world history” into “a date that will live in infamy”—but there are also second thoughts and subtler revisions that speak in his final message to the queer responsibility of sounding speechless. Where, in his first draft, Roosevelt had referred to the nation being “simultaneously and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces,” he opted in subsequent iterations for a note of surprise—“*suddenly* and deliberately”—thereby shifting the narrative emphasis quite firmly from the fact of a two-pronged campaign to the escalating fiction that the military outfit in Hawaii had been caught entirely unawares. And lest, in this light, he should leave listeners in any doubt about his grounds for encouraging a trigger-happy response, Roosevelt went to some pains to tweak his concluding remark. Rather than observing, as he had in his first version, that “since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday . . . a state of war exists between the United States and the Japanese Empire,” he elected on reflection to draft in the present perfect tense (“a state of war *has existed*”), dispersing in its wake any suggestion that the conditions for retaliation had only just begun to dawn on the incumbent administration. With pencil in hand, and an eye on the clock, Roosevelt had scripted his most timely talk to date, and it's remarkable to think that his success might have hinged on a bit of grammar.

There's no knowing for sure whether Marianne Moore listened in to Roosevelt's broadcast on December 8, 1941, but there are solid grounds for speculation. Four in every five American households are reckoned to have tuned in that afternoon,<sup>4</sup> and for Moore there was a personal reason for turning the dial. News had spread rapidly in the hours



following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so it's possible that Moore may already have learned the fate of a familiar battleship, the *USS Detroit*, which had carried her brother Warner, through less troubled waters, in his early years as a naval chaplain. Moore had once quibbled over the precise quality of her brother's vocation—she never could work out whether shipping is “the most interesting” or “the most congenial thing in the world”<sup>5</sup>—and one wonders whether Pearl Harbor had any part to play in thwarting those earlier sentiments.<sup>6</sup> There had been a time when news flashes of this kind had left the Moore household cold—“My mother and I are anti-radio,” she'd informed Ezra Pound in November 1931 (*SL* 260)<sup>7</sup>—yet her resistance had waned in the worst years of the Depression, and keeping up with current affairs had become a regular point of fascination and debate between Marianne and Mary Moore in the course of Roosevelt's ethereal rise to power. “The radio at times has remarkable things on it and we have it as loud as we like” (270), Moore hollered in the summer of 1932, evidently content to have assumed temporary guardianship of Warner's set; and though she was reluctant, as always, to speak for her mother (“I don't know whether Mouse likes it or not”), the poet could see that the medium had already begun to change the atmosphere of their Brooklyn residence, whose rarefied acoustic now had to accommodate something more than their daily sparring, and which was to become a kind of vocal lab, or echo chamber, at the height of 1932's presidential election. “Of late I have been using the radio,” Moore reported on October 6 that year, “and have been troubled by the porcine self-interest of our country; but was stirred in a different way last night by Mr. Hoover's Des Moines address” (253). Moore was quick to spot the opportunities as well as the pitfalls of fighting an election on-air, and it came as a serious blow to her to see Herbert Hoover flounder, despite his very evident talent for turning out “a humdinger, crafty and humourous but also deadly serious.” Indeed, Moore never forgave Hoover's opponent, Franklin D. Roosevelt, precisely because she felt that the Democrat had done so little to set her mind—and ears—at rest. “As for prospective political salvation,” she complained to Kenneth Burke in November 1932, “Governor Roosevelt, when he speaks, always says just the unsuitable thing, and I don't know how we are to expect him henceforth to be wise” (283).

It will seem a curiosity, then, to begin an essay about Moore by invoking Roosevelt as an exemplary media strategist. His rise to



prominence in this respect has received sustained attention—particularly his famed fireside manner—but not by Moore readers, and never, to my knowledge, in relation to her long-awaited book of 1941, *What Are Years*.<sup>8</sup> My purpose, here, is to suggest that something of the media strategist can be detected in this pivotal collection, though we are unlikely to find in it anything as substantive as an allusion, source, or name-check.<sup>9</sup> The nature of these poems' relation to their political environment, rather, has to do with their refashioning in 1941 as sound events, a process of loosening their bibliographic codes in ways that would have seemed inconceivable to earlier generations of politicians and poets and that must raise questions about their subtle performative clout. That Roosevelt expected the details of Pearl Harbor to "be recorded" (Packard [1948] 1951, 57) on December 8 is old news, but it may come as a surprise to know that Moore too was moved to put her voice on record in the very same turbulent week, migrating in her own heuristic mood from print to sound waves and discovering in the course of performance a covert means of radicalizing the most unassuming of lyrics. The chance similarity between Moore's annotative method and Roosevelt's will become clear in due course, but the story of the poet's foray into media relations in the wake of Pearl Harbor begins with her visit to Harvard.

On December 11, three days after the official declaration of war by Congress, Moore traveled unaccompanied to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she'd been invited to address the Gray Foundation on "aids to persuasiveness" (Moore 1976, 14)<sup>11</sup> in the university's Sever Hall. The talk she delivered on this occasion would be published in 1949, with some revisions, as "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto."<sup>12</sup> Her audience that day in 1941 included I. A. Richards (a relative newcomer to Harvard), Henry and Theresa Eliot, and F. O. Matthiessen, whose "interesting and friendly" feedback appears to have come as a sweet shock to Moore, who'd struggled to piece her talk together and who continued to think of the exercise as a piece of "home work" (Moore 1941a). "I ought not to give it away," she wrote to Hildegard Watson on her return to New York, dismayed a little by her own ingratitude, "but Harvard was devastating" (1976, 14). Save for a chance meeting with a black poodle—who "mercifully permitted me to hold his paw"—Moore was initially disposed to think of her visit as a disaster, from her railway journey (and the risk of "having the hem of my dress soiled") to a "solemn little tea" intended to pep her up in time for the afternoon's business.



Still, where others might have taken the proverbial black dog for a bad omen, Moore warmed gradually to the memory of performing in Sever Hall—"like an operating amphitheatre with rather steep aisles"—as well as to the news that her niece, who'd come all the way from Wellesley to see the "Harvard affair" for herself, had instantly begun to boast of her "distinguished aunt" (Warner Moore 1941). "All my resistances and fears were forgotten," she reported to Mary Craig Shoemaker some weeks later, before going on to assure her cousin—and perhaps to convince herself—that these antics in Cambridge had not allayed but aggravated her concern for foreign affairs: "We are all feeling, of course, the weight and grief of the war. The 'two years' Mr. Churchill speaks of, seem a lifetime; I hope you guard your strength by not listening to certain commentators on the radio" (Moore 1941a).

That Moore sought in some small measure to check or regulate her family's listening habits in December 1941 is a suggestive thought, and though the identity of these "certain commentators" remains a mystery, it is plain to see that the poet's day-trip to Harvard had given her a new sense of proportion. Because what Moore neglected to mention in her yuletide letter to Shoemaker is what happened next—after the tea, after the lecture, after the dinner—in the sanctuary of the Woodberry Poetry Room.<sup>13</sup> Rather than returning posthaste to Brooklyn, Moore had been whisked away at 9 o'clock to record a selection of poetry and to be put through her paces by the resident specialist in rhetorical and performance arts. That specialist was none other than Frederick Packard Jr. Packard had risen through the ranks at Harvard in the interwar years, first as an assistant professor, attached to the university's speech clinic, and then as the associate professor of public speaking.<sup>14</sup> By the early 1940s, Packard's in-house record label, the Harvard Vocarium, had become well known in poetry circles on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly among Moore's most industrious paragons—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. H. Auden. Moore was nervous to add her voice to the expanding catalogue, by all accounts, though her admission to the Vocarium was by no means a done deal. Indeed, she would have to wait three years to learn that her "somewhat unadaptive repertoire" (Moore 1944a) was fit for production, and on the basis of that news—and a complimentary disk—Moore was encouraged to relive her encounter with Packard: "Technically—if I may say so—the recording is a triumph; there is no swish; no abrupt changes in volume disrupt the continuity; in fact I detect no extraneous



influence upon the sound. . . . Our saving suggestion that it is desirable to have a certain rapt confidence in what one is reading, gave this Harvard recording its value, I feel; and will be permanently helpful to me" (Moore 1944b). Moore goes on in the same note to admire "the timings of the divisions between poems," the "delicacy of the microphone," and the "surprising verisimilitude" conveyed in the pace of her reading. In case Packard should think such praise a sign of self-congratulation, Moore leaves him in no doubt that her technical success has its roots in good vocal pedagogy: "I could not have imagined that caricature could have been redeemed into plausibility as you redeemed it by your help with diction, the evening you made the recording."

After years of fretting that her recording was not up to scratch, Moore begins in this letter to excavate its delicate fabrication. Charting the bumpy course of a poem from sign to sound, page to plastic, confounds the codes and usual workings of material bibliography, and Moore struggles (three years on) to separate one kind of labor from another—the feat of Packard's seamless engineering from her own repertoire of vocal gestures and execution. Linda Leavell (2014) has spoken briefly yet brilliantly of Moore's positive response to Packard's instruction, and I've found further material to reveal that her dealings with him in 1941 prompted her to seek out the advice of other elocutionists and engineers, including Lois Moseley at Decca Records and Peter Bartók at Caedmon.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, Moore broke into an emerging performance culture that not only allowed her to do the things we know she liked to do to texts—revising, excising, reordering, resurrecting—but also encouraged her, with a new breed of reader in mind, to brave a stylistic makeover that would finally prove lucrative and long-lasting, but which would also seem problematic at times, particularly to those who could still see the advantage of marshaling disparate source material and of finding ways to inhabit borrowed voices without pretending to own or master them outright. The poems she decided to record in December 1941 were taken from *What Are Years* (1941)—"Rigorists," a selection of excerpts from "Virginia Britannia," and "Spenser's Ireland"—each of which might be thought to court the very difficulty of "colonizing" (AG 44) distant sayings. The colonial question was evidently much in her thoughts when she arrived in Cambridge, and one voice in particular would play on her mind all day:



In a certain account by Padraic Colum [*sic*] of Irish storytelling, “Hindered characters,” he remarked parenthetically, “seldom have mothers in Irish stories, but they all have grandmothers”—a statement borrowed by me for something I was about to write. The words have to come in just that order or they aren’t pithy. Indeed, in Mr. Colum’s telling of the story of Earl Gerald, gusto as objectified made the unbelievable doings of an enchanter excitingly circumstantial. (CPr 426)

That dashed afterthought—“a statement borrowed by me”—denotes a rare moment of transparency on Moore’s part, though one wonders whether she may, for one night only, have replaced “something I was about to write” with “something I’m about to *read*.” For within a few hours of uttering these lines in Sever Hall, Moore would be recycling them in her recording of “Spenser’s Ireland,” where they crop up (unattributed) in its second division (see AG 48). The nod in both cases to Pádraic Colum’s nugget of wisdom is cleverly executed. Moore is inclined to call it a “statement,” but as Laura O’Connor observes, and as Moore must have gathered from her reading of Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, the sound bite operates here as an Irish bull—a solecistic speech-act, which is at once grammatically infelicitous, logically absurd, and memorable.<sup>16</sup> The point, we’re told, is pithiness—it’s all in the word order—and yet it would be foolish to take Moore at *her* word in a piece that purports to dispense with the instruments of robust syntax (“such as unnecessary commas, modifying clauses, or delayed predicate” [CPr 421]) and that makes a show of generating solipsism in ways that seem to confound the call for fewer commas (“Here, I may say, I am preaching to myself, since, [etc.]”) (420). As Bonnie Costello has said, the poet’s tactic in this essay, as throughout so much of her verse and prose, is “to acknowledge principles and then violate them” (1981, 225), which is precisely what she does here by upsetting Colum’s precious syntax: his words do *not* come “in just that order,” strictly speaking, because Moore cuts in parenthetically (and here’s the joke) to point out a parenthesis.

It’s a small but telling inconsistency, this, and the matter of intending to get things in the right order—or failing to do so, deliberately or otherwise—bears meaningfully upon the ethic and grammar of Moore’s subsequent reading of “Spenser’s Ireland.” This is the poem, after all, in which “play[ing] the harp backward” (AG 48) seems a magical thing to



do, and with which Moore herself played fast and loose in mid-1941 by inserting Colum's solecism after the first round of publication, thereby revising her poem so as to imagine, as it were, a bull and a harp in close harmony.<sup>17</sup> Oddly, then, Moore's debt to Colum can be said to have mounted as "Spenser's Ireland" continued to mutate in the public domain, but this should not obscure the nature of her commitment to other sources in this thickly textured poem—Edmund Spenser's *View of the State of Ireland* (1598), Donn Byrne's "Ireland: The Rock Whence I Was Hewn" (1927), and so on—which account for over half of its uneven lines, and which place it firmly at the "meeting point" Heather Cass White has identified between two kinds of praxis in Moore's midcareer verse, between "polysemous complexity" on the one hand and "didactic simplicity" (AG xiii) on the other.<sup>18</sup> Readers have worked hard to enumerate and explain Moore's obligations at this stylistic juncture, but it would be a mistake, in the case of the poem's vocalization, to cling too closely to any one of its colonial models. The experience of listening to Moore's recording of December 1941 has the peculiar effect of taking you back to the start of the summer, to the poem's first printing in *Furioso*, which appeared with no explanatory notes and so required—as in the moment of listening—a reader to come to terms with the sensation of polyphony without quite being able to determine the niceties of name or textual origin. So while, for instance, it is reasonable for George Bornstein to call Byrne's essay "the most important source" for "Spenser's Ireland" (2001, 107), this sort of claim is unlikely to register meaningfully in the course of performance, which is rather apt to smooth over the contours of vocal difference, and to amplify those aspects of the poem that appeal to a sympathetic (though no less discriminating) ear. This is not to say that Moore's allusion to Byrne in her last stanza is no longer noteworthy, only to suggest that encountering the echo of his voice in real time—"The Irish say your trouble is their / trouble and your / joy their joy?"—is bound to diminish one's impression that Moore is ventriloquizing the voice she purports to be engaging, and to encourage in its place a more complicated notion that she has lost herself in the heat of performance. To have done so might be to realize the troublesome and tantalizing implications of a thought that once occurred to Laurence Stapleton, which is that "Spenser's Ireland" gives "scope to her dramatic talent," and that it is "a poem written to be read aloud" (1978, 119).



Without disproving or replacing any other kind of "reading," listening to Moore's recording should be instructive for those of us who believe, as Charles Bernstein once advised, that "the audiotape archive of a poet's performance" is a "significant, rather than incidental, part of her or his work" (1998, 7). All we've had to go on, until now, is Moore's studio recording, which is preserved in the sound archives of Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room and the Library of Congress, and the final commercial product, which is available on LP (Moore 1949). But there is a new way to appraise the sound event of "Spenser's Ireland" in December 1941, and it involves a performance script:

SPENSER'S IRELAND *has not altered!*  
 has not altered! -- *has not altered!*  
~~the greenest place I've never seen~~  
 the greenest place I've never seen *it's green*  
 Every name is a tune. *A place as kind as it is*  
 Denunciations do not affect *it's green*  
 a ~~cuprit~~ *cuprit*; *hor blows!!* but it  
 is torture to him *to not be spoken to.*  
 They're natural. *the coat like Venus?*  
 the coat like Venus  
 mantle lined with stars *BB*  
 buttoned close at the neck *the*  
 sleeves new from disuse. *drag? 22? indeed? found one! H H*  
 If in Ireland *drag? 22? indeed? found one! H H*  
 they play the harp backward at need,  
 and gather at midday the seed  
 of the fern for eluding  
 great giants all covered with iron, -- might *?*  
 there be fern seed for unlearning *coquette*  
 obduracy and for reinstating  
 the enchantment? *secret sly hint*  
 Hindered characters  
 seldom have mothers -- *H H*  
 in Irish stories --  
 but they all have grandmothers.

*worn right at the neck*  
*The sleeves new from disuse*

Figure 1. "Spenser's Ireland" (Moore 1941b, 1)



The existence of this document has been noted before, but on each previous occasion it has been identified as a draft.<sup>19</sup> It will be clear, I hope, that this is much more than an intermediary phase in Moore's process leading up to publication. Breath marks, slurs, inflections, caesuras—the typescript is riddled with elocutionary *aides-mémoire*, many of which Moore will have gleaned from Packard's pre-performance tutorial, which included a crash course in enunciation and the trial of a short tongue twister.<sup>20</sup> "We were about to start," Moore was later amused to recall: "Mr. Packard said, 'Now wait. Before we try it, say this after me,—They beat their fists against the posts / And still insist they see the ghosts.' Much entertained, I said it twice, and from then on things went better" (Moore 1942).

Packard's influence is perceptible throughout the extant performance scripts, to be sure, but there is good reason to believe that some of Moore's marginal and interlinear annotations *antedate* her schooling in the sound studio. A letter from Elizabeth Bishop in March 1942 reveals that Moore had fretted considerably over the delivery of her lecture earlier in the day, long before she'd met Packard, and had seized the initiative by marking it up herself with a view to avoiding errors of diction and emphasis.<sup>21</sup> The residue of this vigilance clearly accounts for some of the surface detail in the evening performance script (*figure 1*), but while some of these marks may be taken as evidence of Moore's rhetorical apprehension—a case of anticipating gaffes and slips of the tongue—there are other signs that point to a thoroughly calculated performance, which can be corroborated by comparing script and recording.<sup>22</sup> Vocal uplifts of the sort we see and hear in line 4—"Every name is a tune"—bespeak a capricious lyric intelligence, whose talent for pitching an agreeable cadence invites us all the more forcefully to question the folksy wisdom of the speaker's opening gambit. In its first magazine and book printings, the poem begins in sprightly iambic mood: "the kindest place I've never been, / the greenest place I've never seen." Here, however, while retaining the chiming—even charming—confidence of the closed couplet, Moore allows the new third line to distend as she leans on the point of comparison and nips through the final cluster of syllables: "the greenest place I've never seen, / a place as kind as it is green." The effect is a looser kind of speech patterning, which corresponds (in these opening divisions) to a more pronounced semantic texture: "torture," "disuse," and "obduracy" acquire special emphasis in her reading, and in



the process of establishing those stress points, Moore begins to defuse the lyric's supposed nostalgia for the emerald isle. For a poem that begins in chirpy humor, doubts soon arise in the event of reading as to how "enchantment" might be reinstated.

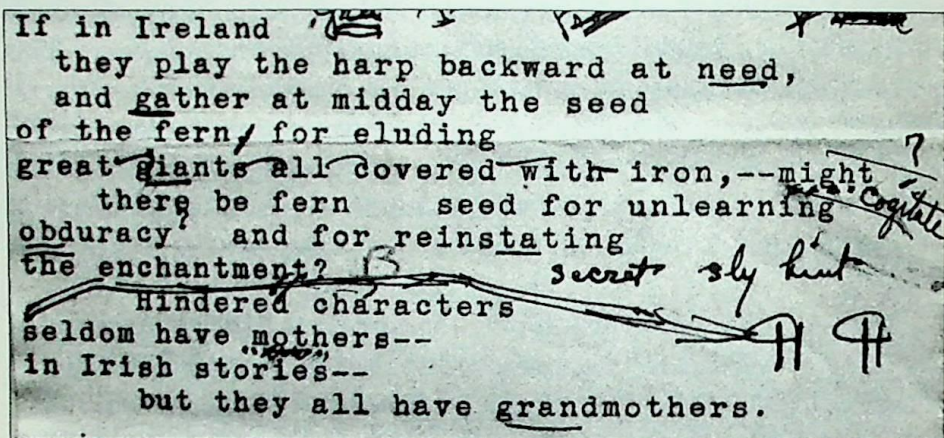


Figure 2. "Spenser's Ireland" (Moore 1941b, 1 [detail])

"Secret sly hint" is the way Moore planned in the margin to bring these lines to life in performance, and above that cue appears a no less mysterious direction—"cogitate"—which is accompanied by a question mark and the dot-dot-dot of marked deliberation, as though to underline the air of possibility that attends the modal verb: "might." Singsong logic gives way here to subtlety and rumination, a feeling for all those things that have to pass sotto voce, between the lines and beneath the voice.

But why attend so strictly, on December 11, 1941, to the tonal shifts of "Spenser's Ireland"? What did it mean "in times like these," as Moore had put it in her lecture that day, to "cogitate" or to "hint" at the problems of "enchantment"? Moore had long sought comfort in the greenest place she'd never seen, both for reasons that have been well documented by her biographers and critics, and for the purposes of promulgating from the very beginning of her career a hybrid national identity that should have done more later to complicate her supposed relation to a "homemade" American modernism. "I am Irish by descent," she explained in her first letter to Ezra Pound in January 1919, "possibly Scotch also, but purely Celtic" (SL 122). With a quiet, imperative nudge, Moore had urged Ireland to "rise automatically" (BMM 223) in the wake of 1916's bloody, republican insurrection, and she continued in the 1920s to commend the nation's imaginative resources—particularly poetry—which she



considered crucial after the war to its "reanimation," as well as a cure for "our restiveness" in the first unsettled months of the Irish Free State (CPr 197). One of the most important conduits for the state of Irish politics at this time was Francis Hackett, a regular contributor to the *New Republic* and the author in 1918 of *Ireland: A Study in Nationalism*. "I like him," Moore confessed to Warner in December 1915, just as her first Irish poem, "Sojourn in the Whale," had begun to surface in her thinking: "In fact I like him so much I think it would be impossible for me to resent his mood or it would, if he continues to write about things as he has written about them in the past. He said something about the lavendered atmosphere of Bryn Mawr that amused me but that's a trifle. I don't take that into consideration" (SL 109). Although Hackett appears to have lost the scent occasionally, he remained a shrewd commentator on developments in Europe and a touchstone for Irish Americans and Irish-born expatriates in particular, such that Moore went out of her way to establish a line of communication with him.<sup>23</sup> In December 1941, having returned from his own sojourn in foreign lands, it was Hackett's chastened voice that made waves in the New York press:

Many Americans of the same racial origin as myself have closed their eyes to the nature of the present world struggle. They must now see the war in a new light. I urge them to give heed to the Irish predicament.

Ireland cannot save itself from invasion by neutrality. Should invasion be feasible for Hitler, Ireland must submit to it or else take its stance with Britain and America. It invites war by taking this stand, it invites hell by refusing to take it. . . .

Democracy has a fighting chance on this planet, but only a fighting chance, and Ireland cannot possibly survive as a nation unless America triumphs. Surely the Irish in America will strive to align Ireland with America. (Hackett 1941)

All thoughts of home rule recede in this short, rallying letter—penned on December 8—only to reveal a more pressing political matter. The subject of Irish neutrality had been floated in the American press before Pearl Harbor, both by the likes of Hackett in smart magazines and in papers such as the *Irish World* and the *Gaelic American*.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* itself had run an entirely different piece in June, approving the work of a political faction called the American Friends of Irish Neutrality, despite



the very obvious pressures of “the present conflict” ([Anon.] 1941). Had Moore read that earlier piece, she may have smiled—and then winced—to see the word *denunciation* figure in its scathing description of the group’s attitude to British war-mongering: “denunciations,” as Moore remarks in “Spenser’s Ireland,” “do not affect the culprit” (AG 48), after all, and the time had come for decisive multilateral engagement. The state of affairs had changed spectacularly by the morning of December 8, indeed, and Francis Hackett was not alone in calling for an instant adjustment of policy. His sense that Ireland could no longer “save itself from invasion by neutrality” garnered considerable support in the days following Pearl Harbor, notably from the Roosevelt administration, which hoped to obtain naval bases in the newly founded state of Éire. The president himself had rejected Éamon de Valera’s invitation to assume some responsibility for Irish waters in May 1940 for precisely this purpose, but Roosevelt now made no bones about seeking to “reinforce” the position of US allies, real or imagined, and finding ways especially to resume conversation with allies who had begun to drift (Roosevelt 1941).<sup>25</sup> The native genius for disunion had become, once again, a talking point of profound significance.

That Marianne Moore had become in some sense *disenchanted* with Ireland by this time on account of its neutrality is old news. Fiona Green (1997), Cristanne Miller (2002–3), and Tara Stubbs (2013) have each called attention to the first extant draft of “Spenser’s Ireland,” in which the poet confesses that she is “less & less in love” with her spiritual homeland. That lover’s complaint has no place in subsequent iterations of the poem, but what *does* appear, in the Harvard recording, is a definite ripple of frustration, which might be considered a sea change in Moore’s thinking about interventionist politics. Penciled at the top of the script and repeated once more for good measure in black ink (*figure 1*), an exclamation mark concludes the first clause—“Spenser’s Ireland / has not altered[!]”—as though to point up the sorry condition of Ireland’s recalcitrance. The voice of someone we may otherwise mistake for a whimsical apologist begins in this way to recede in the very opening breath of the poem, only for it be punctured and punctuated by further displays of typographic alarm: “Denunciations do not affect / [a]the culprit; [!]nor blows[!].” Moore enunciates these lines in her recording with unprecedented zeal, mindful perhaps of the fact that “blows” *had* been suffered in recent days but that it was no longer easy,



or right, to point an accusing finger, or to identify "[a] the culprit" when the very notion of culpability had become so charged and capacious. In no other version of the poem does Moore make this tiny grammatical substitution—"a" for "the"—and it has the effect in December 1941 of casting her lyric in an indefinite mood, of encouraging the listener to see that the "torture" of not being spoken to cuts both ways and that the resolution to "never give in" might give us pause for thought.

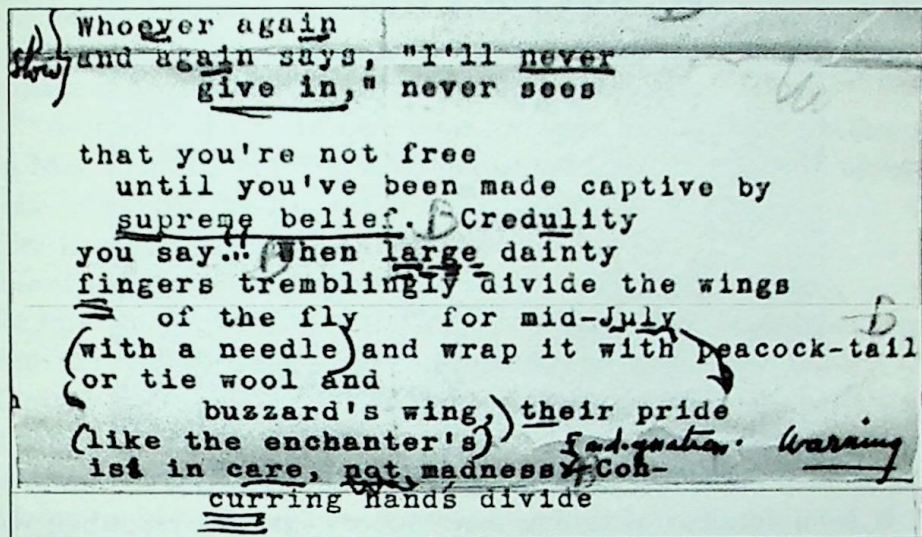


Figure 3. "Spenser's Ireland" (Moore 1941b, 2 [detail])

Having decelerated to allow the voice of dissent its proper say—"whoever again / and again says, 'I'll never / give in give in,' never sees / that you're not free / until you've been made captive by / supreme belief"—Moore inserts a note of "warning" in the margin, a sign of "indignation," as though the work of "con- / curing hands" has acquired a new, constitutional importance. To my ears, such vocal cues have the ring of a Hackett job, and indeed Moore herself was not insensitive to the inducements or redolence of a spot of linguistic opportunism (see figure 4). The "ire" diphthong twangs quietly throughout "Spenser's Ireland," from the "iron"-rich deposits of the giant anecdote, through changeable "Irish weather," to Moore's pronunciation of "Eire" as "I-re" in the poem's fifth stanza. In these closing lines, Moore spells out her irritation by uprooting the sound cluster once more. Being "Ire-ish," in December 1941, is a vexed and vexing business, and there is something "Irreparable"—and mournful—about that final, irritable confession.



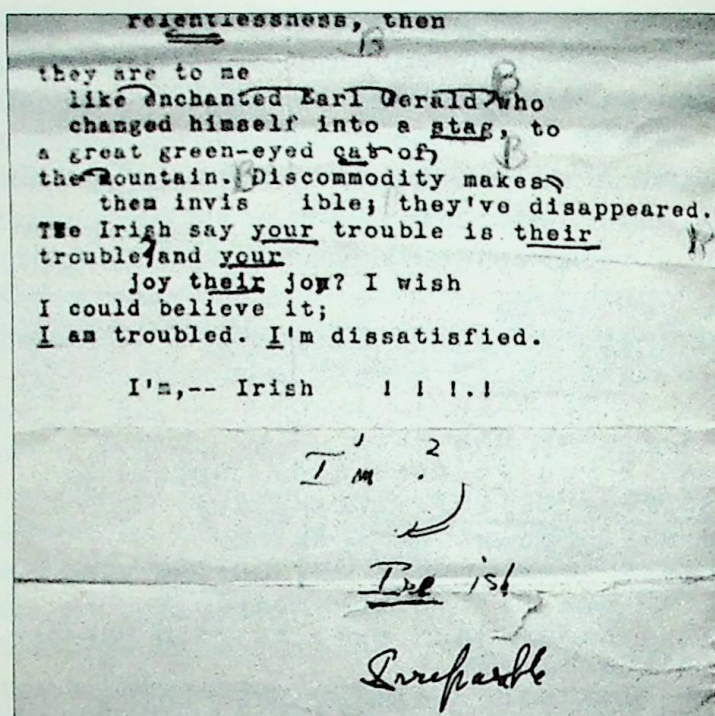


Figure 4. "Spenser's Ireland" (Moore 1941b, 3 [detail])

It is an accident of timing that Moore's Harvard recording was undertaken in such conflicting circumstances. There is no way that she or Packard or the Gray Foundation could have known that her visit to Cambridge would coincide with a state of national emergency, or that the talk she'd been booked to deliver and the poems she'd agreed to record would end up speaking so acutely to the declarations penned by Roosevelt and Congress. And yet to think over this kind of aural friction might be to reappraise the facts of Moore's turn in the 1930s—which was performative as well as stylistic—and to think again about the transparency of compositional gestures that are too apt to slip away in the flurry of textual revision. I have often wondered what Moore could have meant at the beginning of "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto" when she refers to "times like these" (1949). Now we know—thanks to her letter to Mary Craig Shoemaker in late 1941—that she began to formulate this essay at a pivotal moment in foreign affairs;<sup>26</sup> and so now, perhaps, it's time to think more openly about the prestige and status we ascribe to her printed works, fortified by the knowledge that a particular date of publication may belie more ephemeral kinds of instantiation and



rendition that characterize a work in progress. The reason critics have never been inclined to contextualize the Harvard recording is that most listeners have found themselves more than usually removed from its moment of inception: after three years of collecting dust, the recording was transferred from tape to disk in 1944 by the Harvard Vocarium, before being reassigned to the sound archives at the Library of Congress in 1948, where it was subsequently released as a composite album.<sup>27</sup> No marks remain on that composite album to disclose the recording's provenance or historical coordinates, or to suggest that its material rite of passage commenced with such meticulous rehearsal.

As it turns out, there were some hiccups rehearsal could not forestall. In May 1944, upon listening to her disk, Moore confessed to feeling a little irked that she'd mangled the all-important word. "I am told that Eire is pronounced Air-uh," she informed Packard, as much for his information as for hers, "and wish I had substituted the word Ireland for Eire" (1944b).<sup>28</sup> One feels for her, of course, but it's difficult to wish, with her, that she'd managed to get her tongue around the name. For on December 11, 1941, there had been things about Eire (*Ire-uh*) that could not easily be ironed out—things, indeed, that only a poet of Moore's shifting temperament had felt able to approximate. And for all her regrets, Moore could not bring herself to abandon Packard in such woeful humor. "Your courage on behalf of idiosyncrasy," she confessed, "helps me to forgive myself in ignorance," and with that, it seems, she finally put the record straight.

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I would like to thank those who listened to an early version of this material on March 2015 at "Twenty-First-Century Moore" (University of Houston), particularly Elizabeth Gregory and Stacy Hubbard, who later provided me with some important feedback. Linda Leavell, too, has been characteristically generous in sharing her own thoughts and discoveries, and in responding to my queries. So has Elizabeth Fuller, who remains a firm friend of every Moore scholar.

## §

Edward Allen is a lecturer in the faculty of English, University of Cambridge, and a fellow of Christ's College. He is the author of the forthcoming *Modernist Invention: Media Technology and American Poetry*.



## Notes

1. For a sample of recent accounts and critiques, see Baar 2004, Hitchens 2009, Haarman and Lombardo 2009, and Astore 2016. To hear “the protagonists and the apologists . . . damn[ing] themselves in their own words,” see Weinberger 2005.
2. See Hallett 2012, 219. As Hallett acknowledges, declarations of war have featured consistently in the workings of language philosophy, beginning with J. L. Austin’s lectures at Oxford and Harvard in the 1950s, later collected in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962/75).
3. For details of Roosevelt’s compositional process, see the anonymous article in *Prologue* (2001). As the authors observe, Roosevelt had to do without two of his usual speechwriters, Samuel I. Rosenman and Robert Sherwood, who were in New York City on the day of the attack. The article includes digital reproductions of Roosevelt’s first amended draft.
4. For analyses of the listening figures, see Barnouw 1968, 151 and Brown 1998, 118. The best recent attempt to tell the story of Pearl Harbor and its immediate repercussions is Kupfer 2012.
5. Having joined the Maryland Naval Militia in October 1915, Warner had become a permanent acting chaplain on March 11, 1918. He’d gone on to serve upon the USS *Detroit* from December 22, 1926, to June 7, 1929. Stationed at the Groton Submarine Base in Connecticut at the time of the Pearl Harbor bombing, Warner was later posted to Pearl Harbor in the summer of 1943, whereupon he was appointed chaplain of the US Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas. He retired from naval duties in 1948. His career in the navy is narrated in more detail by Patricia C. Willis (2010), with an appended note by David M. Moore.
6. The poem in question is “Dock Rats,” first published in *Others* (1919) and reprinted with some modifications in *Poems* (1921) and *Observations* (1924) (see Moore 2002, 95–96, 245–48). Moore never allowed her “Dock Rats” back into print, despite the opportunities for doing so in 1935, 1951, 1961, and 1967. Still, the Moore siblings continued to correspond about ships and shipping, as, for instance, when Marianne wrote to Warner in July 1932 of a new Mariner’s Museum in Virginia (SL 268).
7. Abbreviations refer to these Moore texts: *CPr*, *Complete Prose* (1986); *SL*, *Selected Letters*, 1997; *BMM*, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002); and *AG*, *Adversity and Grace* (2012).



8. See, for example, Craig 2000 and Lenthall 2007, 87–114. Luke Carson (2002) and Odile Harter (2013) both attend sensitively to Moore's difficult political position in the 1930s—to her clash of opinion with the likes of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Burke, to her disapproval of New Deal legislation, and to what Carson characterizes as "a civic republicanism informed by Calvinist values" (2002, 318). I am in agreement with Harter's contention that "it is during the 1930s that Moore develops the sense of obligation that shifts her artistic priorities toward [her] later, more inclusive style" (2013, 335), but what I propose to contribute in this essay is the thought that Moore's changing style was facilitated by the very media ecology that had made Roosevelt's such a familiar voice in the mid-1930s.

9. By contrast, one might look to Moore's letter on February 22, 1933, to Morton Zabel, in which she mentions "Mr. Hoover's call for a poem" (SL 299) and her unsuccessful attempt to come up with the goods. For the abbreviated history of this poem, see Molesworth 1990, 259–60.

11. Since Cyrus Hoy's edition of *Marianne Moore: Letters to Hildegard Watson* (1976) is available online, I provide his numbering system in the place of page references.

12. Moore returned to the material of her Harvard talk in December 1948, when she delivered a new version to the Grolier Club in New York City, whereupon she agreed to its publication in the *Grolier Club Gazette* (May 1949). It was subsequently reprinted in *Predilections* (1955), *A Marianne Moore Reader* (1961), and *Complete Prose* (1986). Little evidence survives to suggest the way this material developed, if at all, in the intervening years—1941–48—save for internal indications such as the addition in the final piece of the passage about the Federal Reserve Note (dated December 13, 1948). Owing, no doubt, to the addition of this passage so late in the composition of the piece (just a week before its delivery to the audience of the Grolier Club), editors and publishers have fostered the idea that the piece belongs to that time and have dated it, as in *Complete Prose*, May 1949. Yet an unpublished letter on December 26, 1941, to Moore's cousin, Mary Craig Shoemaker, reveals that the opening paragraph of the piece we know today as "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto" was there in the lecture's first incarnation: "I began my talk by saying that in times like these, we tend to discredit art but that the pen is a sword; that the sword itself—as Commander King Hall has said in his book *Total Victory*—is of use not really to annihilate people but used in the hope of persuading the enemy to change his mind" (Moore 1941a).

13. The Woodberry Poetry Room was located at this time in the Widener Library. For more on its history and its relocation in 1949 to the Lamont Library—to which Moore paid a visit in 1954—see Mattern 2011.



14. For more on Packard's career, see Packard and Rubery 2011.
15. I trace the much longer arc of Moore's phonographic artistry in *Modernist Invention: Media Technology and American Poetry* (forthcoming).
16. "Bulls are cited, not said, if I may use a bull to define the speech genre," Laura O'Connor quips (2006, 166-67), before proceeding to flesh out the matter in relation to the Edgeworths' *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802). For Maria Edgeworth's particular influence on Moore's poem, see Green 1997.
17. As White observes in her facsimile edition, the first version of the poem appeared in *Furioso* 1 (Summer 1941) and did not include the stanza that begins "If in Ireland" (see AG 155-57 and cf. 48). Tara Stubbs calculates Moore's particular debt to Colum in *American Literature and Irish Culture, 1910-1955* (2013, 153-55).
18. For the economy of Moore's borrowing in this poem, see Willis 1980.
19. See Stubbs 2013, 154, and Miller 2002-3, 9. The only person, to my knowledge, who has entertained the possibility I'm advancing here is Robin Schulze, who surmised some time ago (in conversation) that some of Moore's typescripts bear a resemblance to performance scripts. I'm grateful to her for sowing that seed, and for encouraging me to stick with it.
20. I deal with Packard's thoughts on punctuation at length in *Modernist Invention*.
21. "The nicest Event of 1942 has been Lester [Littlefield]'s *photostat* of the Harvard Lecture," Bishop announced to Moore on March 17, 1942. "It has done me so much good. It is marvellous. . . . I only wish I knew what some of the little marks meant and could hear the delivery" (1942). The photostat does not appear to have survived.
22. The case for reading the typescripts specifically as *performance* scripts, rather than "drafts," becomes indisputable when we compare all three typescripts with the recording of 1941. The typescript of "Spenser's Ireland" is consistent in appearance with those of "Rigorists" and the selection from "Virginia Britannia," and each of these corresponds precisely to the recording. Crucially, each typescript reveals handmade revisions (of word and line sequence) that appear *only* in the recording and not in any printings of the poems in question.
23. Hackett first came into contact with Moore's poetry in 1920, thanks to the editor of *Broom*, Lola Ridge, who appears to have been a go-between (see Moore 1920[?]). For more on the Irish-New York literary scene, see Stubbs 2009 and 2013.
24. See T. Ryle Dwyer's assessment in *Irish Neutrality and the USA, 1939-1947* (1977, 26).



25. For more on the trajectory of Irish-American negotiations, see Dwyer 1988, 24–25.

26. See note 12.

27. Packard wrote to Moore on February 12, 1948, to detail his negotiations with the Library of Congress, which involved transferring the rights of the Harvard recording to the Library of Congress (Packard 1948). Thus the recording appeared the following year as *Twentieth Century Poetry in English: Paul Engle, Marianne Moore, Allen Tate, John Gould Fletcher [and] John Malcolm Brimin Reading Their Own Poems*, Library of Congress PL 2 (1949).

28. This letter from Moore to Packard in May 1944 helps to date another typescript of "Spenser's Ireland" which is held in the Rosenbach archive (filed under I:04:21). Evidently produced and annotated on a different occasion to that of the Harvard script, the typescript features a pencil note that spells out a phonetic solution to pronouncing Eire ("Air-uh"); the note also outlines an alternative ("If Ireland") to the troublesome phrase. These marginal instructions are strictly consistent with the advice Moore recounts in her letter to Packard. We do not know when or from whom this advice was received—in the wake of her playing the Harvard recording, perhaps, or on another occasion entirely. But what we *can* say for sure is that this typescript is a performance script and not a draft, since it clearly responds to difficulties that arose after the publication of *What Are Years*, and that it postdates the recording in December 1941.

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# “So He Who Strongly Feels, Behaves”:

## Marianne Moore’s Ethical Detail

David Herd

In a poetic career marked by a relative reluctance to issue general statements, Marianne Moore’s essay “Feeling and Precision” has a particular value within her body of work, being a steadfast if characteristically unhyperbolic articulation of certain of her compositional principles.<sup>1</sup> There are other pieces in Moore’s *Complete Prose* (1986) that present themselves in general terms; “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” and “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto” are notable examples. “Feeling and Precision” stands out, however, for the deliberateness with which it announces key aspects of her aesthetic, as a balancing of impulse and technique that captures something pivotal to her poetic intentionality. Written in 1943, the essay was of value not least as it provided a guide to her work of the previous two decades: to the radical experimentation of *Observations* (1924) and the rigorous crafting of the thirties poems. Significantly, however, the statement also constituted a move in an emerging midcentury conversation, forming as it did her contribution to the 1943 session of the then displaced annual international symposium *Entretiens de Pontigny*. What Moore arrived at, on the occasion of the symposium, shaped as it was by an intense awareness of the gravity of world affairs, was an articulation of her compositional principles that turned aesthetic convictions toward ethical concerns. The real interest of that turn, when regarded historically, lies in the continuity of her expression, in the manner in which she angled her existing idiom toward contemporary events. What Moore lays out, in other words, in “Feeling and Precision” is a basis for ethical action underwritten by poetic conduct, where the continuity of the discourse lies precisely in the poetry’s commitment to detail.

Hosted that year at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and convened by the exiled French philosopher Jean Wahl, the 1943 gathering



known as “Pontigny-en-Amérique” was an event of some importance for Moore, being the first time she met Wallace Stevens. As the Mount Holyoke archives record, Stevens and Moore each contributed to a week of talks under the heading *Poésie*, Stevens’s contribution being his own singular aesthetic statement, “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.”<sup>2</sup> Running from August 8 to 13, the series concluded on the Saturday with a general discussion featuring all the contributors: Moore and Stevens joined by John Peale Bishop, James Rorty, and Wahl himself. Over and above the importance of the meeting with Stevens, however, what Pontigny also represented for Moore, as it did for all the event’s contributors, was a significant gauge of her aesthetic position.<sup>3</sup>

Founded in 1903 by the medievalist Paul Desjardins and informed, as Christopher Benfey has described, by Desjardins’s “vision of the Latin Middle Ages as a time of pan-European humanistic exchange,” Pontigny was conceived as “an international community of artists and thinkers” (2006, 3). Taking its name from the Cistercian abbey in Burgundy where the convention first took place and was hosted every year until 1939, Pontigny allowed in particular for the forging of close relationships between leading German and French intellectuals. Henri Bergson and Walter Benjamin were notable participants, with Maurice Blanchot convening the final symposium to take place at the abbey before it was looted in 1940 following the invasion of France. The three occasions on which Pontigny was hosted at Mount Holyoke (in the summers of 1942–44) were thus interim but highly charged gatherings, symposia in which the relation of intellectual life to global political crisis was explicitly and unavoidably at issue. Drawing on many original Pontigny participants then exiled in New York, notably Jacques Maritain (who would soon help shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), Marc Chagall, and Roman Jakobson, the intention of the Holyoke gatherings was “to recover a vanished moment of prewar international cultural exchange” (5). Or, as Henri Focillon put it: “Pontigny . . . is a spiritual force that the death of Paul Desjardins and the occupation of Pontigny by the enemy must not be allowed to extinguish” (Heurgon and Paulhon 2006, 733). Framed by Wahl, for whom poetic inquiry was vital to a recalibration of contemporary philosophy, the discussions at Pontigny were of the utmost gravity as regards the relation of intellectual discourse to contemporary events. They were occasions, in other words, on which a poet’s terms had to hold good, not only in relation to their own practice, or the practice of their peers, but relative to the wider intellectual economy.



None of this is to imply that Moore's participation at Pontigny in and of itself triggered a shift in view, although it is clear from her correspondence that the impact of the event on her was strong. As she wrote to Elizabeth Bishop, "An unselfish experiment like that of the Pontigny Committee leaves a certain memory of exaltation, and a great desire to be of service to those who suffered" (Benfey 2006, 9). The point, rather, is to register Moore's contribution to the symposium as a form of reckoning, to take the conversation that developed from and through Pontigny as a way of gauging the value of her intervention in the ethical discourse of the midcentury moment. What that intervention turned on, this article argues, is Moore's singular commitment to the force of detail, and to appreciate this, it will be suggested, is to read the terms of "Feeling and Precision" in both directions. It is to recognize, in the first place, that her aesthetic experimentation of the 1920s afforded her a register through which to engage critical midcentury ethical debates. It is to appreciate also, however, that her commitment to the necessity of detail endured, that it remained foundational to the more discursive poems characteristic of her writing through and after the war.<sup>4</sup>

The object of the essay is thus to sharpen criticism's understanding of Moore's ethical turn by gauging the specific gravity of the terms that frame the argument of her contribution to Pontigny. To do so is necessarily to revisit the contribution itself, but it is also to consider the discourse with which it intersected. What converged at "Pontigny-en-Amerique," as orchestrated by Wahl, was a set of considerations and intellectual responses that would continue to define ethical inquiry. To read Moore in relation to such considerations is to trace a singular relation between her version of modernism and the new forms of experimental poetry that emerged in America after the war. It is to register also, however, and in ways that criticism should endeavor to make clear, that a poetics of modernist description is once again resonant with our own ethical condition.

## "Feeling and Precision"

For any writer who received it, the invitation to contribute to the Mount Holyoke sessions of Pontigny constituted a call for a compelling enunciation of their position. With the fact of the war intensified by the presence of leading writers and artists in exile—Hannah Arendt, for example, recently escaped from Europe, was a significant contributor to the proceedings—the occasions necessitated a sure sense of how



any given statement might contribute to larger intellectual concerns. For Moore, where that necessity settled was on the requirement for fastidiousness. As she put it, in "Feeling and Precision": "When writing with maximum impact, the writer seems under compulsion to set down an unbearable accuracy" (CPr 396).<sup>5</sup> Quite what is meant by an "accuracy" that is "unbearable" becomes clear as the essay moves toward its conclusion. Writing capable of maximum impact, on the other hand, is explained directly and in Poundian terms as "a diction that is virile because galvanized against inertia." With this in mind, what "Feeling and Precision" quite largely comprises is a series of recommendations for composition: toward certain kinds of word order, against adverbs, and on the preferred function of the connective. The piece is Poundian also in its use of example, so that it presents a short history of literary precision, Henryson, for example, exemplifying "the artless art of conveying emotion intact" (399).

As such, as a series of recommendations and illustrations, "Feeling and Precision" functions as a guide to creative writing, a series of dos and don'ts for the apprentice poet.<sup>6</sup> How it differs from such a guide rests on the way exactitude of expression is held to underwrite an ethical relation, how precision is charged with and accountable to an ethical concern. This cuts both ways. In the first place, Moore takes precision to denote what one might term an authentic presentation of self. Socrates is given as the exemplar in this regard, Moore citing his observation that "I would rather die having spoken in my manner than speak in your manner and live" (398). What this means poetically, as Moore presents it, is principally an attention to rhythm, since, as she sees it, "you don't devise a rhythm, the rhythm is the person, and the sentence but a radiograph of personality" (396).<sup>7</sup> Rhythm, and the sentence that results, has the objectivity of the scientific reading, a measure of what in a subsequent piece she would call "idiosyncrasy" or, as she put it in her Pontigny piece with reference to her own "fondness for unaccented rhyme": "We must have the courage of our own peculiarities" (398). What precision underwrites, in other words, is the idiosyncratic, that which (as Moore would later clarify in her Ewing Lecture at the University of California) "is peculiar to the person (the Greek *idioma*)" (514), a cultural regard for which, Arendt was to argue at the same moment, was critical to an ethical condition.<sup>8</sup>

What is at issue, however, in "Feeling and Precision" is hardly simply the self, crucial as idiosyncratic expression was to Moore. As she put it via the example of Rembrandt, but in the terms of Henry McBride: "It was as though Rembrandt was talking to himself, without any expectation



that the point would be seen or understood by others. He saw these things and so testified" (401). Rembrandt is exemplary precisely because his fidelity to his way of seeing is matched by his fidelity to the objects that constitute his field of vision. What matters in the context of Moore's argument, however, is how McBride's observation modulates the terms, such that Moore's "compulsion to unbearable accuracy" becomes a form of testimony, the fundamental seriousness of which establishes the ground for her remarkable closing remark. As she puts it by way of conclusion, in a form that the mention of testimony anticipates but does not predict: "Professor Maritain, when lecturing on scholasticism and immortality, spoke of those suffering in concentration camps, 'unseen by any star, unheard by any ear,' and the almost terrifying solicitude with which he spoke made one know that belief is stronger even than the struggle to survive. And what he said so unconsciously was poetry. So art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer's moral and technical insights" (402). As a conclusion, Moore's closing paragraph presents a characteristic move, arriving at a statement of general significance for which the ground has been carefully but also invisibly laid. Writing in dialogue with the occasion of Pontigny itself, with its clear injunction to address the wider ethical context, Moore aligns feeling and precision with the contemporary political exclusion represented by the camps, the writer's "technical insights" having as their mandate the fact that suffering goes unseen and unheard. This is not to argue that, in order to address herself to the dialogue taking shape at Pontigny, Moore was compelled to adjust the terms of her aesthetic inquiry. Rather, precisely what she articulates is a disposition that first found expression in *Observations* (1924), a commitment to "fastidiousness," which is to say "unbearable accuracy," that in the context of the war underwrites a substantive ethical position.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible, however, and necessary, to be more specific. To be in dialogue with the occasion, with the shaping purpose of Pontigny, meant among other things to engage with a deepening inquiry into the discourse of feeling. For Wahl himself, Moore's interlocutor on the occasion, such a deepening inquiry required first and foremost a recognition of that "feeling of our kinship with the universe, which poetry has better retained" (Wahl 1943, xii). Wahl's place in the history of poetry, and in particular in its development as a discourse in relation to philosophy, was most notably registered by Stevens, for whom he was the dedicatee of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." What Stevens's dedication also registers, however, is the degree to which, as thinker,



translator, and intellectual organizer, Wahl captured his contemporary condition, the degree to which, by his various forms of question and intervention, he grasped and helped shaped the ethical temper of the midcentury period.<sup>10</sup>

To understand Wahl's role in the intellectual culture of his moment, it is important not least to appreciate the degree to which his reading of American writing shaped his thought. He was important for Moore herself because she figured in his edition of *Ecrivains et Poètes des Etats-Unis des Amériques*, an important early presentation of American modernism to French readers. A sharper measure of the degree of his engagement with American writing, however—in which he found a suppleness toward temporality commensurate with Bergson—is the fact that when held in the concentration camp at Drancy after the invasion of Paris, the text by which he oriented himself was *Moby-Dick*.<sup>11</sup> Wahl escaped Drancy in the back of a butcher's truck, hiding amid the carcasses. His interventions in contemporary intellectual formations, this is straightforwardly to observe, were shaped both by wide reading and by acute personal experience. As he would put it in the opening chapter of his most prominent English language volume *The Philosopher's Way*: "The frames have been shattered. In fact, there are no longer any frames, and the very things that were in those frames have themselves disappeared. Thus, we are confronted by an intricacy of phenomena of which the classical philosophies gave us no idea. We are in the presence of a no-man's land, even a no-word's land" (Wahl 1943, 10). What such zones unarticulated by philosophy called for, as Wahl saw it, was a sharpened sense of the "most subtle relations that constitute the real," where relations with both things and with persons were equally at issue. Things, according to Wahl (in terms that resonate with Moore) were to be recognized in their defining opacity, as "dense little worlds" having a "kind of inwardness which is closed to us" (220). As regards persons, on the other hand, what had to be appreciated fundamentally was the status of the other, and not just for the sake of the other—crucial as that consideration was—but for the sake of the self. "One of the characteristics of contemporary philosophical reflection about the relation between persons," Wahl writes, "is this insistence on the necessity of other persons even for the constitution of my own person" (229).

As Benfey characterizes it, Jean Wahl's principal function in the intellectual economy of his moment was as high-level go-between, a stimulator across disciplines and cultures whose principal intellectual trace, it follows, lies in his significance to other people's work. In philosophy, where one chiefly finds that trace is in his most distinguished



commentator, Emmanuel Levinas, who in "Jean Wahl and Feeling" (first published in 1955) acknowledges Wahl's importance while transposing his central category into a structure of analysis recognizably Levinas's own. Registering the urgency of arriving at newly resonant "affective terms," Levinas subscribes to the view that a renewed attention to "feeling" is necessary in "lead[ing] us toward" a "bare, blind contact with the other" (1996, 114). Such a troubled affective sense of contact permits Levinas's own complicated sense of ethical understanding, that understanding where, as he puts it, "there is both relation and rupture, and thus awakening of the self by the Other, of me by the Stranger, of me by the stateless person, that is, by the neighbor who is only nearby" (6). Or as he describes it more specifically in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) (for which Wahl is again the dedicatee), it is the face of the stranger that entails both obligation and the awakening that comes of an obligation to act: "The being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing goodness" (1969, 200). This is the position that Wahl had arrived at in noting "the necessity of other persons for the constitution of one's own personality." It is the position Moore also articulated in her wartime review essay "Who Has Rescued Whom." Published in October 1944, the year after she had spoken at Pontigny, and in the same month that "Feeling and Precision" appeared in the *Sewanee Review*, Moore's review of *Behold the Jew* (1943) (a book-length poem by Ada Jackson) concluded with one of her characteristically sudden shifts toward abstraction: "Some do not believe that all nations are of one blood, and shrink from the un-fascist minister who says the star of David is not the enemy of the star of Bethlehem. . . . And 'while you read they die, they died'; they, by way of whom all our moral advantages have come. If we yet rescue them—those who are alive to be rescued—we are still in debt and need to ask ourselves who would have rescued whom" (*CPr* 403). To situate "Feeling and Precision" as a contribution to the dialogue at Pontigny, a dialogue framed by Wahl, is to understand Moore as participating in a defining midcentury discourse.<sup>12</sup> Wahl is present in the articulations of both Stevens and Levinas because he had a compelling sense of contemporary ethics, calling for a new language of affections in ways that crossed both disciplines and cultures. Moore sought to articulate a similar requirement, where the medium of affective renewal was the compulsion to accuracy, a writerly exactitude that presented the idiosyncratic self in its defining relations with persons and things. Technique was critical—the rigor of expression that constituted adequate description—but where the imperative for such description lay was in contemporary acts of political exclusion.



## “In the Public Garden”

Just as Marianne Moore’s contribution to the dialogues at Pontigny provided a sharpened articulation of aesthetic imperatives she had arrived at in her prewar work, so equally it gave shape to the ethical disposition that would characterize her poetry through and after the war. “Feeling and Precision,” to reiterate, is a transitional text. Thus, just as in Wahl’s writing one finds the seeds of significant postwar ethical discourse, so in Moore’s writing in that wartime moment one finds her developing a stance that bears significantly on our understanding of her relation to postmodern poetics. One way to observe this is through her poem “In the Public Garden,” published in the *Boston Globe* in 1958 and in *O to Be a Dragon* a year later.

The poem matters in this context in two broad and related ways. In the first place, as is described below, it finds Moore abruptly addressing herself to an issue—the crisis of human movement—that was understood by 1958 to be a shaping legacy of the Second World War. It is a poem, in other words, whose principal concern is ethical but in which the ethical focus further tests the disposition “Feeling and Precision” had sought to evolve. The poem matters also, however, because in the way that it presents the public discourse of her moment, Moore’s poem delineates different strategies for poetics in the postwar period. One such strategy, outlined by Al Filreis (2012) in an extended reading of “In the Public Garden,” is to make the poem a space in which public discourse is framed for scrutiny. It is a strategy one can trace through Moore’s work, not least in *Observations*, and that makes it possible to identify her, as Filreis does, with subsequent poetries that emphasize the readymade utterance as a determining device. To read the poem this way, however, while catching Moore’s orientation toward public discourse, is to miss the intertwining concerns of feeling and precision that, as I argue, constitute Moore’s steer for subsequent poetics.

Written for the occasion of the Boston Arts Festival, “In the Public Garden” is, as Filreis observes, a highly purposeful poem that belies its sense of purpose—in which the moment of purpose, between the sixth and seventh stanzas, seems somehow to be stumbled upon. Until that point, the poet presents a syllabically elegant tour of Boston. We glimpse Harvard (partly through her conversation with a taxi driver), the golden dome of Faneuil Hall, and spring in the public garden (“more than usual / bouquet of what is vernal” [*CPo* 190]). The poem shifts at the beginning of stanza six, the five stanzas that follow capturing the change of direction:



## Marianne Moore's Ethical Detail

let me enter King's Chapel  
 to hear them sing: "My work be praise while  
 others go and come. No more a stranger  
 or a guest but like a child  
 at home." A chapel or a festival

means giving what is mutual,  
 even if irrational:  
 black sturgeon-eggs—a camel  
 from Hamadan, Iran:  
 a jewel, or, what is more unusual

silence—after a word-waterfall of the banal—  
 as unattainable  
 as freedom. And what is freedom for?  
 For "self-discipline," as our  
 hardest-working citizen has said—a school:

it is for "freedom to toil"  
 with a fee for the tool. (190–91)

To quote at length is to register a series of interruptions. In the first place, the poet interrupts her own itinerary by entering King's Chapel, established in 1686 as the first Anglican Church in New England, and therefore a significant building in Boston's colonial history. Prompted to a contemplation of the significance of a chapel and of a festival—that it "means giving what is mutual / even if irrational"—the poet interrupts herself a second time by mentioning a series of phrases on the subject of "freedom." As Filreis observes, the phrases are Eisenhower's, being excerpts from a 1958 article, "President Urges Junior Leaguers to Widen Good Work" (525). For Filreis, it is these phrases the poet refers to when she speaks of "the word-waterfall of the banal," though neither the syntax nor Moore's own voting record can be taken as confirmation of this view. Either way, having referred to Eisenhower, the poem then interrupts itself a third time, only now more emphatically, by incorporating a phrase that wrecks its progress:

Those in the trans-shipment camp must have  
 a skill. With hope of freedom hanging  
 by a thread—some gather medicinal



herbs which they can sell.  
 Ineligible if they ail.  
 Well?

A “trans-shipment camp” is what would now be called, less euphemistically, either a refugee camp or a detention center. If the former, it might refer, as Filreis observes, to the camps holding Congolese people displaced in the period from 1958 to 1960. If the latter, it might refer to Holocaust survivors held by the British on Cyprus as they attempted to reach Israel (see Filreis 2012, 525). Either way, it is a densely freighted phrase to introduce into a poem that only a moment before was contemplating downtown Boston—like somebody just built such a camp in the middle of the public garden and called on the poet to make an inspection. How the phrase sits in the poem’s structure is interesting to note. Moore’s syllabics can, in theory, accommodate any combination of sounds so the line itself is held intact. That the phrase temporarily disturbs the poem’s poise is nonetheless indicated by the breakdown of her otherwise reliable stanza formation. Momentarily the otherwise stable five-line stanza form becomes, conspicuously, a three-line fragment. The real question, however, is not formal but semantic. How, that is, does one gauge the phrase’s incorporation into the poem’s field of meaning?

For Filreis “In the Public Garden” is a continuation of Moore’s “expression of a program for achieving accuracy and currency of political and civic rhetoric” (2012, 511).<sup>11</sup> His objective, in part, is thus to reestablish Moore as a poet of enduring political and ethical purpose at a moment—the late 1950s—when her popularity could obscure such continued seriousness. What principally he hopes to establish, however, is a reassessment of Moore’s relation to the New American Poetry, a context he revisits with reference to William Burroughs’s collaborations with Brion Gysin.<sup>13</sup> Filreis is right that such a reassessment is necessary, both to our understanding of Moore and of the New American Poetry; where I differ is in the reading of Moore’s aesthetic strategies that results. Thus, as Filreis reads it, the key phrase in Moore’s poem is “word-waterfall of the banal,” pointing as it does to a linguistic condition that for Burroughs and Gysin, just as (as he sees it) for Moore, the necessary response is the cut-up. The comparison is a stretch, as Filreis knows, his point being to establish a broad literary consensus around the practice of the ready-made, for which interpretation, in Moore’s case, there are some grounds. Thus from this point of view, Eisenhower’s language is excised in order to expose its deficiency, a practice that in Moore one can clearly trace to the



brilliant acts of collage that constituted *Observations*. As Filreis sees it, then, Moore should not be read at a generational remove from the impulses of the New American Poetry but as coinciding with them, addressing the failings of civic discourse by placing it on display. This is broadly true. However one reads the tone of Moore's references to Eisenhower in "In the Public Garden," and for all that she was reluctant to offer praise when reviewing Donald Allen's anthology, there certainly were continuities between her compositional practice and certain poetic strategies evident in the *New America Poetry*.<sup>14</sup> James Schuyler, for instance, as I have argued elsewhere, writes (and collages) directly out of the Marianne Moore instruction manual, and to beautiful effect (see Herd 2007, 109–35). But what about the "trans-shipment camp"? How does the poem incorporate such a phrase? How does the poet engage the ethical implications of such a point of reference?

To understand what those questions mean for Moore, it is necessary to approach her work from a different vantage, not that of conceptual poetry but a vantage made possible by registering her engagement with the discourse framed by Pontigny. To read "In the Public Garden" in relation to that discourse is to register a context by which to assess the poem's reference to the phenomenon of the "trans-shipment camp," Arendt being among the most important commentators on such phenomena. As she discussed at length in the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "statelessness" was "the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history" and "stateless persons" "the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics" (1967, 277). Observing displacement to be the war's enduring legacy, Arendt provided a frame of reference in which the trans-shipment camp is a necessary consideration; it is precisely the site in which the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, statelessness, made itself visible. Such camps, in other words, were not aberrations but structurally defining settings.

To note a major assessment of the period in which the "trans-shipment camp" was not an aberration but a structurally determining coordinate is already to reenter the narrative of the poem. The history of Boston, it is immediately to recall, is itself one of movement and displacement; Charles Olson was writing an epic to this effect only forty miles north. One form of that movement is represented by King's Chapel, symbolizing the autocracy that gave rise to forced migration, producing subsequent displacement among the indigenous community. There is continuity, in other words, between the chapel and the camp, the latter demonstrating the lack of a mutuality that the former apparently proposes.



Even allowing for this narrative, however, the incorporation of the camp into a poem about looking at Boston poses an ethical consideration to which the poet, if she is serious, had to understand herself as providing some form of response. And my suggestion here is that if one reads Moore exclusively through a version of modernism that emphasizes the primacy of the procedures of collage and cut-up, it is difficult to see how a poem such as "In the Public Garden" can address the reference it makes, except perhaps to observe that it is an embarrassment to the writing. If, on the other hand, one reads Moore through and into the ethical discourse with which she was properly and effectively in dialogue at Pontigny, one recovers an aspect of her writing capable of meeting the charge of the reference to the camp. What one needs to emphasize, this is to argue, is not the cut-up but its etymological cognate the detail. It is in Moore's detailing—her compulsion to unbearable accuracy—that her writing prepares to register that which is excluded from the frame.

## Marianne Moore's prose detail

To clarify: a detail is a small individual feature, fact, or item, especially a small part of a picture reproduced for close study. As verb it means to describe, item by item, to give the full particulars of, or, in the sense of a commission, to assign to undertake a particular task. The word is from the French from *detailler*, from *de-* (expressing separation) and *tailler*, "to cut." This, in a quite precise sense, is how Marianne Moore worked. She didn't cut up exactly, though she did cut out, in the process of importing and exporting phrases to and from her notebooks. One registers this detailing on almost every page of Moore's *Complete Prose*, which is not just to say that Moore likes, or dwells on, detail, but that detail is the structuring element of her composition. This is a radically paratactic procedure. Moore's practice is to accumulate aspects of the subject at hand, and her compiling of them amounts to a constantly elaborating description, until such point as, by means of the procedure itself, a judgment is reached. The detail itself, in other words, is all—or almost all—the argument necessary.

To give just one example, in "Idiosyncrasy and Technique" Moore mentions and cites in dense proximity to one another W. H. Auden's inaugural lecture as professor of poetry at Oxford, Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Hesketh Pearson, the King James version of the Bible, the Revised Standard Version, Dr. Alvin E. Magary and Dr. Moffat (both biblical commentators), Henry James, T. S. Eliot (on John Milton, François de la Rochefoucauld, Jean de la Bruyère, and Michael Hamburger),



Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Laurence Binyon on translating Dante, *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954), and Dr. Edmond Sinnott's *The Biology of the Spirit* (1955) (see *CPr* 506–9). One could go on, and Moore does go on, sentence after sentence introducing a new statement of fact, which in one sense renders her prose a further form of collage, statements from the notebook set alongside one another, but which in another constitutes a form of meticulous argument—judgment arrived at by weight of observation. In this case the conclusion regards idiosyncrasy itself: “In saying there is no substitute for content, one is partly saying there is no substitute for individuality—that which is peculiar to the person (the Greek *idioma*)” (*CPr* 514). The lecture provides a series of idiosyncrasies, individuals presented through stylistic peculiarity, *idioma*, in other words, rendered as matter of fact.

That such itemizing constitutes a position, that more than mere accumulation, it presents, as Charles Tomlinson put it, “the ethical extension of fact itself” (1969, 2), is established by a supporting structure of general statements and reflections. Thus, just as much as the defining procedure of Moore's prose pieces is to detail, so frequently she will take a moment in a piece to reaffirm the underlying logic of the procedure, the statements themselves constituting a lexicon that frames the writing's bearing. With reference to the artist Paul Rosenfeld, for instance, she affirms “the interested mind with the disinterested motive” while, more pointedly, in her consideration of *Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr* (1947) by Edith Finch, she notes how “Miss Finch is, in her relentless justice, a Vermeer of circumstance and idiosyncrasy” (*CPr* 418). The association is strong: justice is a function of a regard for idiosyncrasy, with such regard, as Moore argued at length, being in turn a function of humility. One exemplar of the value of humility as poetic method is the poet Babette Deutsch.<sup>15</sup> As Moore puts it, reviewing Deutsch's *New and Selected Poems* (1959), “Miss Deutsch has a gift for verisimilitude as has been evident from the first, and here epitomizes Goya's *Disasters of War* in the phrase: THIS I SAW” (527). Again, one could continue. What these instances suffice to exemplify, however, is the carefully formulated lexicon whereby a procedural accumulation of detail assumes an ethical force. This is said most emphatically in relation to Deutsch, the reference to the title of one of Goya's series of war paintings serving to establish the writing as an act of witness, a form of testimony that, just as in Rembrandt, underwrites the aesthetic achievement in question.

The reason for providing these two kinds of documentation—of Moore's propensity to detail, and of her specifications of what such



detailing means—is to bring to the fore a balance in her procedure that a contemporary reading of the poetry of document, along the lines provided by Filreis, has the potential to obscure. Thus it is important to register that in the combination of procedural compulsion and abstract commentary, what one has in Moore's prose—as in many of her poems—is a method that corresponds to a form of conceptualism.<sup>16</sup> It is by detailing, this is to suggest, rather than by detail, that the argument of Moore's writing is established. To read her prose this way is to echo Filreis's commentary on "In The Public Garden": that the poem shares an implicit sympathy with the logic of the ready-made that underpins the cut-up. This, however, is only part of the story. What this means (and where I differ from Filreis) is that to detail is not exactly to cut up. Rather, it is to cut out in order to form an observation, with the observing itself carrying its portion of the argumentative force. This is where Moore ended up in "Feeling and Precision," with reference to Maritain: "Professor Maritain . . . spoke of those suffering in concentration camps, 'unseen by any star, unheard by any ear.' . . . And what he said so unconsciously was poetry. So art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer's moral and technical insights" (*CPr* 402). What matters here is the modification, poetry as feeling modified by technical insight. Moore's prose argues, in other words, for a form of procedure governed and informed by the act of witness.

### "So he who strongly feels"

In her major poetic statement of 1940, "What Are Years?," Moore opens by posing the ethical question that in its unavailability is an aspect of the condition of war: "What is our innocence, / what is our guilt?" (*AG* 15).<sup>17</sup> It was a refrain across her prose (repeated in interview) that, as she put it in "Feeling and Precision," "We must be as clear as our natural reticence allows" (*CPr* 396). "What Are Years?" is impressive for its clarity, for the directness with which the poem's statement of position is allowed to unfold. The achievement is technical in the sense that the argument hinges precisely on the shape of the stanza, on the line break generated by the counting of syllables: "All are / naked, none is safe" (*AG* 15). Since the poem's ethical position is necessarily complex, so the thought must be elaborated, and it is at the level of rhythm that such elaboration is made possible, the syllabics entailing the listening that makes it possible for the argument to be heard.



Such required hearing is most clearly achieved at the beginning of the final stanza:

So he who strongly feels,  
behaves. The very bird,  
grown taller as he sings, steels  
his form straight up.

It is a moment that requires some consideration. For a start, the link between feeling and conduct could not be more clearly stated; it is imperative, as the poem understands it, that we "strongly feel." What matters for the poem, however—as it did for Jean Wahl—is how the link is constructed, a consideration that, in two senses, takes into account the detail of the poem. The first detail is rhythmic, resting on the entirely assured distribution of sound across the caesura. "Behaves," the consequence of feeling, falls with what Moore would have liked to call compelling "naturalness" at the beginning of the line. In one sense, this is a trick of the accomplished poet, the holding back of meaning across the line break. On the other hand, in being so emphatically rhythmic, the argument from feeling is doubly underlined, catching the reader at the level of physicality just as it registers at the level of sense. The second detail is visual. What follows, in other words, from a meditation on the relation between feeling and behavior is an itemizing of a bird's posture as he sings, "his form straight up." This is by no means Moore's most detailed presentation of an animal. Rather, what the poem provides here is something like a representative detail. The particularity of the detail definitely counts—it matters that the bird "steels"—but what really matters is that there is a detail to contemplate, because it is in observational detail, as Moore wants us to appreciate, that affect is formed.

Principally what matters in "What Are Years?" is that the value of detail is established. It is strong feeling informed by detail, not simply strong feeling, that is conducive to the ethical conduct the poem imagines. About this, for Moore, there is no question; it is tantamount to an article of faith. Elsewhere, however, it is the particular kind of detail that matters. Quite frequently, Moore settles on the specificity of the face. One such example is "Rigorists," and the face in question, in this instance, is that of the reindeer with which the poem concludes:

[...] And  
this candelabrum-headed ornament  
for a place where ornaments are scarce, sent



to Alaska,  
 was a gift preventing the extinction  
 of the Eskimo. The battle was won

by a quiet man,  
 Sheldon Jackson, evangel to that race  
 whose reprieve he read in the reindeer's face. (AG 16–17)

The question the poem concludes with, in other words, is, how do you read a face? And, more precisely, how did Sheldon Jackson read a face?

Also published in 1940, and echoing "What Are Years?" in its insistence on the ethical force of detail, "Rigorists" should likewise be understood as a poem in relation to war. It follows that Jackson's role in the poem, as a figure who intervened in the history of colonization, must be carefully estimated. To tease that judgment out, it is the face one has to attend to. The reprieve of the reindeer's face proposed by the final line refers to the fact that Jackson arranged for the importation of reindeer to Alaska to replace dwindling supplies of other food stocks. It was a "gift" intended, as the poem records, to prevent "the extinction / of the Eskimo." The complication in this case is that in the history of Alaska, as Richard Dauenhauer (1996) has observed, Jackson is a profoundly controversial figure precisely because he practically effected extinction by other means. As Dauenhauer summarizes: "Jackson . . . believed that only through massive conversion to Christianity and acculturation could Alaskan Natives be spared the military defeat and tragic poverty and exploitation of the reservation system befalling native Americans" (1996, 81). What *acculturation* principally meant was the "insistence on English-only interaction," an educational policy that, as Dauenhauer describes, "led to suppression of Native Cultural development" and that was "disastrous to native self-image and language survival" (83, 85).<sup>18</sup>

What matters in the context of the poem—to the balance of its judgment—is how Moore frames Jackson's intervention in the conflict between white settlers and indigenous people. Thus, the counter to his reading of the reindeer's face is provided by the earlier part of the poem, which in its intricacy and detail is worth quoting at length:

"We saw reindeer  
 browsing," a friend who'd been in Lapland, said:  
 "finding their own food; they are adapted



to scant *reino*  
or pasture, yet they can run eleven  
miles in fifty minutes; the feet spread when

the snow is soft,  
and act as snow-shoes. They are rigorists,  
however handsomely cutwork artists

of Lapland and  
Siberia elaborate the trace  
or saddle-girth with saw-tooth leather lace. (AG 16)

One of the poem's rigorists is, of course, Jackson himself—rigorous in his Presbyterian zeal. The other rigorists are the reindeer, but also the poet's friend, who is meticulous in her account of the animal's conduct. What the friend observes—and this is why Moore quotes her—is the specificity of the reindeer's relation to its environment, captured in the detail of the operations of the feet against the snow, but also in the name, "adapted" as they are "to scant *reino*."<sup>19</sup> The really compelling moment, however, is the moment of encounter:

One looked at us  
with its firm face part brown, part white—a queen  
of alpine flowers. Santa Claus' reindeer, seen

at last, had gray-  
brown fur, with a neck like edelweiss or  
lion's foot,— *leontopodium* more

exactly."

Actually "seen / at last," the reindeer's face is presented in exquisite detail, its neck "like edelweiss or / lion's foot, — *leontopodium* more // exactly." It is the detail that underwrites the moment of relation, that shows clearly that the speaker was affected. To observe a creature in its environment, the poem asserts, is to understand both that and also how it belongs, which makes the argument one of indigeneity, of the necessity to understanding of situational detail. To observe the deer's face, the poem proposes, in the reality of its circumstance, is to gain a deep regard for the manner in which it exists.



Whatever else one might say of him, and whatever he might have intended, one can observe categorically of Jackson that he did not demonstrate a deep regard for the manner of indigenous existence. He did not, this is to point out, read the indigenous people's culture and relation to their environment with the degree of care that Moore's friend reads the way the reindeer has adapted. The poem's first reading of the situation, in other words, provided by the poet's friend, is a check and balance on the implications of the second reading of the situation, given by Jackson, where what the second reading tended toward historically was extinction, which is to say genocide. That Moore argued in this manner in her wartime poems, that she refracted politics by a process of substitution, is evident elsewhere in her work of the period. Observing that "Moore's political positioning takes the form of metonymy or analogical example," Cristanne Miller notes in Moore's reference to Herod in "The Mind Is an Enchanted Thing" a "chain of logic [that] indirectly condemns the politics of Hitler" (2008, 365, 367). The "logic" in that case is that the poem articulates a fineness of observation ("in the dove-neck's // iridescence," for example [*CPo* 135]) that the figure with whom it concludes, Herod, catastrophically lacks. Against the impoverished qualities of feeling and precision that permit Herod to effect the massacre of the innocents, Moore's poem presents the mind's ability to apprehend detail, a capacity to discern that "tears off the veil" where the veil is prejudice. The suggestion here is that "Rigorists" follows the same pattern: intricate articulation of a quality of mind conducive to respect, followed by reference to a historical personage whose actions were motivated by zeal. Exactly how the balance of judgment falls in the case of "Rigorists" is inevitably a little harder to finalize simply because Sheldon Jackson's moral standing has not been so categorically settled by history as has Herod's. The pattern of argument is entirely comparable, however, and at the very least what "Rigorists" articulates is an intricate relation between detail and affect. It is a matter of profound importance, in other words, for Moore, as she variously proposed in her prose of the period, that there is a complex cultivation in her writing of the practice of witness.<sup>20</sup>

One further face in Moore's midcentury poetry establishes the theme. First published in the *New Yorker* in 1961, the ethical consideration represented by "Rescue with Yul Brynner" is framed by its epigraph, Brynner having been appointed special consultant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 1959 and 1960. Written three years after "In The Public Garden," the poem returns to the situation of the "trans-shipment camp," reference to which had such an altering



effect on the bearing of the earlier poem. In this case, the manner of the reference is not juxtapositional, since the poem is concerned explicitly with Brynner's role with the UNHCR. What distinguishes the poem, rather, is the plainness with which it communicates the circumstantiality of such camps. As it observes:

There were thirty million; there are thirteen still—  
healthy to begin with, kept waiting till they're ill. (CPo 227)

Brynner, on the other hand,

flew among  
the damned, found each camp  
where hope had slowly died

As with the earlier reference to the trans-shipment camp, the question is how the poem can incorporate its subject matter, how it can meet the demands of its ethical engagement. In part it does so by being factually correct, by registering the scale of the statelessness (between thirteen and thirty million) that, as Arendt reported, defined the period. As elsewhere, however, its consideration settles, in the final stanza, in the detail of exchange:

"Have a home?" a boy asks. "Shall we live in a tent?"  
"In a house," Yul answers. His neat cloth hat  
has nothing like the glitter reflected on the face  
of milkweed-witch seed-brown dominating a palace  
that was nothing like the place  
where he is now.

The reference to the palace is to the set of *The King and I* (1956), the setting with which the face of Brynner was most readily associated. But this is not that place, is nothing like that place, and the question, in this altogether other setting, is what does Brynner's face reflect? The answer, one is called on to imagine, is the face of the boy who asks the question. As the poem positions them, in other words, the faces are in a tense and mutually informing relation. This raises the question Moore previously articulated in relation to the issue of rescue: who in this circumstance has rescued whom? How the ethical charge is incorporated, in other words, is in the registration of mutual constitution, in the "awakening," as Levinas put it, "of the self by the Other, of me by the Stranger, of me by the stateless person" (1996, 6).



## “Secrets objects share”

To read Marianne Moore’s argument for “Feeling and Precision” in relation to the midcentury inquiry in which she was participating at Pontigny is to register a significant continuity in twentieth-century poetics. It is to understand how the brilliant fastidiousness of her early experiments enabled her to contribute to an ethical discourse that, as we can now appreciate again from our own fraught ethical moment, was foundational to postmodern poetics. One way to express this is in relation to Olson, on whose work Moore commented in her review of *The New American Poetry* (1960) and for whose critical idiom she had little instinctive sympathy. Between Moore and Olson, even so, there was a structural convergence, though neither could easily have noticed it, to be found in the second part of Olson’s 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse.” As Olson put it: “For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas. . . . If he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share” (1997, 247). Writing in the late 1940s, out of his own understanding of the war, Olson arrived at a poetics of humility the purpose of which was to underwrite a newly chiasmic relation to objects—things and persons—which was itself grounded in a practice of witness, a necessary closeness of listening.

To hear that position articulated in relation to Moore is to register the ethical force of her ongoing project of observation. What she wrote out of, when she contributed to Pontigny, and what she continued periodically to reframe, was a profound sense of the way systematic political exclusion altered the poetic act. Faced with absolute precarity, she argued for a new language of feeling, a language rooted in the registration of affective detail. From which it follows that, as we read her in the present moment, we need to register the whole of her utterance, not just the cutting up but also the unbearable accuracy, the intensely exacting acts of description. What she framed, as the midcentury made its catastrophic demands, was a procedure of witness, a form of expression through which ethics might be renewed through detail.



David Herd is professor of modern literature at the University of Kent. His collections of poetry include *All Just* (2012), *Outwith* (2012), and *Through* (2016). He is the author of *John Ashbery and American Poetry* and *Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American Literature* (2001), and the editor of *Contemporary Olson* (2015).



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## Notes

1. Both Stevens's talk and Moore's, along with an introduction by John Peale Bishop, were subsequently published in the *Sewanee Review* (52, no. 4, 1944). Archived copies of the original program for the event can be accessed through the Mount Holyoke College Archive and Special Collections website, [mtholyoke.cdmhost.com/cdm/](http://mtholyoke.cdmhost.com/cdm/).
2. For an account of Moore's long-awaited meeting with Stevens, see Schulze 1996, 157–60.
3. To position Moore's statement at Pontigny in this way is to address what Moore criticism tends to regard as a break. For an account of the criticism's articulation of the break, see Miller 2008, 353, 375.
4. Abbreviations refer to these Moore texts: *CPo*, *Complete Poems* (1981); *CPr*, *Complete Prose* (1986); and *AG*, *Adversity and Grace* (2012).
5. Schulze reads "Feeling and Precision" as consisting "primarily of technical comments about poetic form and diction" (1996, 159). This degree of emphasis, I argue, is to misjudge the discursive context to which the piece was a contribution, and therefore to underestimate the force of the ethical register that underwrites it, as felt, in particular, in Moore's conclusion.
6. Moore again echoes Pound here. See her 1931 review of a *Draft of XXX Cantos*, where "A man's rhythm 'will be, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable'" (*CPr* 276).
7. "Idiosyncrasy" is central to Arendt's account of the polis in *The Human Condition* (1998), it being the function of the polis to enable the quality of communication that an emphasis on idiosyncrasy entails. For a full consideration of postwar American poetry's emphasis on the "idiosyncratic," see Carbery 2015.
8. "Feeling and Precision" has been widely considered, with Cristanne Miller's 2008 article being among the most carefully calibrated discussions of Moore's position in the piece. Where I differ from Miller is in the way the discourse of "feeling" hinges on the compositional practice of detail. It is in the exact balancing of the terms of the title, in other words, that Moore's essay focuses her existing practice toward ethical concerns.



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9. For a discussion of Wahl's dialogue with Stevens, see Luyat-Moore 1998.
10. For an account of this episode, see Benfey 2006, 6.
11. For further considerations of the way Moore articulates the ethical value of a language of "feeling," see Leader 2005 and Schaller 2012.
12. In articulating this view, Filreis draws on Muriel Rukeyser's review of *O to Be a Dragon*, which praises Moore's "skilful and flexible use of the document as part of her poetry" (1960, 18).
13. Burroughs's collaborative experiments with Gysin were collected in *The Third Mind* (1978).
14. Moore's review of *The New American Poetry* was published in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* on June 26, 1960.
15. Moore articulated the value of "humility" most concertedly in "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto"; for a careful discussion of this see Leader 2005.
16. One could say that the procedure of detailing gains an abstract dimension that Vanessa Place would term allegorical. Place conducts an extensive discussion of the function of allegory in conceptual writing in "The Allegory and the Archive" (2010).
17. For particularly strong considerations of the place of "What Are Years?" in Moore's body of work, see Green 2000, 202–3 and Leader 2005, 322–26.
18. For a counter reading of Sheldon Jackson, see Haycox 1984.
19. The detail of such adaptation, and the subtle relationality it implies, was, as Jennifer Leader has observed, of considerable interest to Moore (see Leader 2005, 330).
20. This is to address an important consideration raised by Fiona Green. As Green observes, with reference to Moore's Second World War poems, "The effect of remoteness on a poetic much prized for its close and accurate observations was also potentially disabling" (2000, 214). The argument here is that for Moore the ethical function of the poet was to cultivate the complex practice of witness, it being of such a capacity that language at this moment was most manifestly in need.

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## Reviews

*The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, edited by Steven Belletto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 297 pages.

*Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory*, by Hassan Melehy. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 255 pages.

*Beat Drama: Playwrights and Performances of the "Howl" Generation*, edited by Deborah R. Geis. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 357 pages.

*Thom Robinson*

In a recent article for the *Washington Post*, Jeff Weiss describes traveling the West Coast of America, interviewing surviving members of the Beat Generation (Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane di Prima, Michael McClure, Herbert Gold, and Gary Snyder). During his Beat odyssey, Weiss recounts how a woman "with a side-ponytail berated me in a Mardi Gras-themed bar for glorifying 'worthless straight white men of privilege'" (2017). This accusation suggests a particular understanding of what the label "Beat Generation" means, one informed by the stereotype of *On the Road* (1957) and the sense of Jack Kerouac's protagonists as pioneers of the gap year and cultural appropriation. Weiss's barroom encounter is telling for what it indicates about the future standing of the Beats; while once progressives might have argued for these writers' acceptance into the academy, in the future they may argue for their exclusion.

In the world of Beat studies, the battle to justify the Beats' inclusion in the academy remains ongoing. Steven Belletto's introduction to his edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (2017), begins by addressing the irony of the book's existence, given the Beats' opposition to established authority and hierarchical institutions. Many of the volume's contributors play up the Beats' outlaw potency, with the key figures—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs—portrayed as social revolutionaries whose lessons are still relevant today. This tendency for some contributors to reinforce familiar Beat mythologies means that the book's more questioning voices are particularly welcome. For example, Nancy M. Grace provides a salutary reminder that the majority of Beat writers "enjoyed what only about five percent of the American population from the 1930s through 1950 could afford: a college education" (68).



Grace demonstrates that the Beats' historical relationship to educational establishments hasn't always been entirely oppositional, and this type of contextualization is sorely missed in chapters that are keener to take the Beats' iconoclastic status for granted. As a case in point, Brenda Knight's chapter on Beat memoir begins with the assertion that the Beats "forever marked the mid-twentieth century with their intense desire to differentiate themselves from everything that came before in art, literature, film, politics, and lifestyle" (137). The statement is undermined by the fact that the next chapter in the book (Hilary Holladay on Beat criticism) begins by conversely emphasizing the Beats' debts to that which came before, with an invocation of William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman, and the Old Testament as key influences on the work of Allen Ginsberg (151).

Typically, the strongest chapters in the *Cambridge Companion* maintain a critical distance from the hyperbolic force of Beat mythology while directly engaging with questions of how "Beat" can be defined and understood. Kurt Hemmer works to define the "Beat novel" by rejecting simplistic definitions of the genre as entailing "a novel about Beats" or "a novel by an author generally acknowledged as Beat" (111). Instead, Hemmer argues that "the essential trope of the Beat novel is the outlaw undergoing a spiritual crisis" (113). He accordingly finds Kerouac's "Duluoze Legend" (the author's collective name for his novels) to be "the crowning achievement of Beat fiction" (118), in which this trope is combined with a "discernible Beat aesthetic" (116). For those familiar only with Kerouac's best known works, Hemmer's conclusions may be unexpected: he does not consider either *On the Road* or *The Dharma Bums* (1958) to be part of the Duluoze legend, because neither is "an experimental work of spontaneous prose" (120). Instead, Hemmer argues that the most emblematic Beat novels are in fact some of Kerouac's least widely read, specifically *Visions of Cody* (1973) and *Doctor Sax* (1959).

The opposition between what "Beat" means to a mass audience (for example, *On the Road*) and how the Beats can best be understood critically (for example, *Doctor Sax*) is also touched on in Oliver Harris's chapter on William Burroughs's uneasy position within both Beat literature and postmodernism. Harris provides a nuanced consideration of Burroughs's role as the perennial odd man out of the three key Beats, during the course of which Harris shows a willingness to dispense with the label "Beat" altogether: "'Beat' was a loose term, an adjective rather than a noun, so that, even if it least fitted Burroughs, in a sense none of the Beat writers were Beat" (125). While in the 1970s "the politics of canon formation" saw Burroughs enlisted to form "a Beat Holy Trinity"



with Kerouac and Ginsberg, Harris observes that it is now “only in the more general cultural and biopic narratives, which continue to inform the way both are popularly understood, that Burroughs and the Beats still belong inseparably together, as in films based on their lives and works such as *Naked Lunch* (1991), *On the Road* (2012), and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013)” (127). Harris valuably highlights the ways in which the Beats continue to be “popularly understood” by casual readers (or, more pertinently, viewers), as opposed to how these writers are considered within Beat scholarship.

If Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs were initially bound together due to “the politics of canon formation,” then the (re)integration of women writers into the Beat canon during the 1990s receives comment throughout the *Cambridge Companion*. Extended discussion is given to titles such as Lenore Kandel’s poetry collection *The Love Book* (1966) (subject of an obscenity trial in San Francisco) and *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969) by Bonnie Bremser. The diversity of the expanded Beat canon forms the basis for a set of strong chapters (with Ronna C. Johnson on gender, Polina Mackay on sexuality, and A. Robert Lee on race). At other points, passing references to the importance of women in the Beat movement can seem hurried or glib. In assessing the role of Beat women, William Lawlor notes the importance of Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s mothers, and of Burroughs’s common-law wife Joan Vollmer, in terms of the roles they played in these writers’ lives: “If Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac were instigators, they were so because Joan Vollmer Adams, Naomi Ginsberg, and Gabrielle Kerouac dominated their thinking” (34). Crediting Vollmer as a source of creative inspiration seems a little perverse, given that she died at Burroughs’s hand in the couple’s ill-fated game of “William Tell.” Though Lawlor refers to Burroughs’s later (questionable) claim that the death of Vollmer led directly to his becoming a writer, to follow this idea to its logical conclusion leaves one with the awkward sense that Vollmer’s primary contribution as a “Beat woman” was to be accommodating enough to die so that her husband could write *Naked Lunch* (1959).

Though the *Cambridge Companion* highlights the breadth of writers who can be placed within the spectrum of “Beat,” Kerouac remains the figure who has received the largest body of critical work, while the bibliography of his own authored texts remains ever expansive, due to the ongoing excavation of material from the archives. Hassan Melehy’s study, *Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory* (2016), marks an impressive addition to this wealth of criticism. Melehy establishes his study as a corrective to misleading characterizations of Kerouac as a literary savant led by guileless



enthusiasm alone: "A man who out of semiliteracy wrote ineptly though sometimes sweetly" (4). In order to counter this persistent misconception, Melehy centers his study on "the basic biographical fact" of Kerouac's French Canadian upbringing (1). As Melehy summarizes: "At birth he was given the name Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac, at the time his native Lowell, Massachusetts was about 25 percent French-speaking, and by his own account he didn't speak English before he was six or so, and with an accent until age sixteen." This emphasis guides Melehy's readings of Kerouac's works as exercises in the study of exile, with particular focus given to *The Town and the City* (1950), *On the Road*, *Doctor Sax*, and *Satori in Paris* (1966).

Melehy's chronological overview begins with the argument that Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City* (usually seen as a young man's attempt to write a Great American Novel) forms "the allegory of the author's efforts to become American . . . the projection of full entry into American English and American literature of this son of immigrants" (31). Kerouac's conflicted feelings about achieving this result are evidenced by a letter he wrote to the Franco-American journalist Yvonne Le Maître upon the novel's publication (following her review of his book). Here, Kerouac promises his recipient: "Someday, *Madame*, I shall write a French-Canadian novel, with the setting in New England, in *French*" (42). Following this letter, Kerouac made efforts to write a novel in French, and these were contemporaneous with his writing of the original "scroll" manuscript of *On the Road*. Melehy examines Kerouac's text *La Nuit est ma femme* (*The Night Is My Woman*), written "just before" (46) the *On the Road* scroll, which leads him to argue: "In light of this manuscript, critic, scholars, and other commentators should simply stop regarding *On the Road* as a mere memoir or autobiographical novel representing a bohemian's or drop-out's or countercultural hero's peregrinations. It is, rather, an exercise in a poetics of exile" (51).

Melehy's notion of "a poetics of exile" challenges criticisms of Kerouac as a white American writing of African American or Mexican culture from a position of unthinking privilege, while also countering dismissals of Kerouac as a writer practicing a naive and simplistic craft. Like Hemmer, Melehy believes *Doctor Sax* to be perhaps the key Kerouac text, referred to by Melehy as the author's "masterpiece" (131). While the childhood world captured in *Doctor Sax* ensures the text is commonly read alongside *Maggie Cassidy* (1959) and *Visions of Gerard* (1963) as part of "Kerouac's so-called 'Lowell trilogy'" and therefore distinct from



Kerouac's novels of life on the road, Melehy argues that "this is a false distinction: his settled 'home' turns out to be just as much permeated by exile—linguistic, geographic, and cultural—as his road novels" (120).

Melehy's close familiarity with French Canadian dialect results in fascinating examples of intentional literary devices employed by Kerouac that have been missed by critics because of the lack of attention paid to his place in a French language heritage. For example, he provides a summary of instances in *On the Road* in which Kerouac's "unidiomatic sentences" (which have "prompted many to dismiss the book as bad writing") in fact demonstrate his tendency to think in terms of "French syntax and vocabulary" (50) (see the expression "I figured to worry about that," which Melehy notes "borrows from the French 'Je me suis figuré,' which may be followed by an infinitive").

Melehy finishes his study with a reappraisal of one of Kerouac's most critically neglected novels, *Satori in Paris*, generally read at face value as prima facie evidence of his physical and artistic decline in which, clouded and befuddled by alcoholism, he travels to France in a failed attempt to research his ancestry. Melehy argues that Kerouac's disarming references to his alcoholic intake throughout the book are a deliberate artistic device informed by the example of Rabelais's *Gargantua*, and that such references form the Rabelaisian function of "social levelling . . . pushing aside barriers of class, nationality, profession, and location" (163–64). Melehy's study is to be commended for the clarity of its insights (rooted in archival research), its fresh readings, and its skeptical approach to critical orthodoxies.

Deborah R. Geis has edited a collection of essays, *Beat Drama: Playwrights and Performances of the "Howl" Generation* (2016), that focuses on an area untouched by the *Cambridge Companion*: plays and other performative works produced by Beat writers and associated figures. The absence of theater from the *Cambridge Companion* is more than made up for by Geis's volume, which, over the course of twenty-four chapters, provides broad interpretations of both "beat" and "drama." This includes discussion of plays written by canonical Beat authors such as Kerouac, Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso. The fact that these are important Beat names does not necessarily mean that the plays in question are popularly thought of as major works, not least because in many cases these dramatic writings are all but absent from the shelves. As Geis's introduction notes, "The improvisational and collaborative, intentionally ephemeral nature of many of these works meant that Beat drama texts were not often published, or were only printed in very limited editions" (4). Ronna



C. Johnson's chapter tackles Corso's dramatic oeuvre as a case in point: "Corso is not known as a playwright, and his dramas are esoteric or obscure, and often hard to locate" (35).

For those seeking to define a "Beat drama" aesthetic, the majority of examples here fulfill the criteria of "esoteric or obscure," owing heavy debts to Dadaism and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. A representative example is Geis's summary of Ferlinghetti's one-act play, *The Alligation* (1962): "Shooky the alligator is kept, figuratively, on a short leash by his owner, Ladybird. Visits from the Blind Indian . . . warn her to let him go free" (59). At the play's climax, the curtain falls on "the alligator raping Ladybird and the Blind Indian crying out for help." This type of absurdism is not necessarily a stylistic trait that one would associate, for instance, with the Beat novel. In assessing Beat writers in terms of their dramatic works, we are required to turn to different definitions of "Beat" from those we may apply to Beat prose. Doing so serves to undermine the traditional Beat hierarchy, with Kerouac, for example, reduced in importance. Tim Hunt's chapter on Kerouac's sole play, *Beat Generation* (written shortly after the publication of *On the Road* and belatedly published in 2005), expounds on the difficulties that the author faced in transforming his prose into drama. Ironically, the result was a play much less "performative" than Kerouac's novels, for it "lack[ed] the momentum and richness of play, tone and implication" (19) found there. In contrast to the spontaneous prose of novels such as *Visions of Cody* (a book that "casts the writer as a performer"), *Beat Generation* is lacking because "the script marks and enforces a divorce between the originating and authentically performative action (Kerouac writing the script) and what the actors would 'stage' (a representation of a representation) for an observing audience" (20).

In terms of literary censorship, those wishing for a play of the Beat Generation to place alongside the outlawed works of Ginsberg and Burroughs may be enthused by Michael McClure's *The Beard* (1965). Consisting of a scabrous and repetitive verbal duel between Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow (and climaxing in the former performing oral sex on the latter), the play resulted in a series of court cases for obscenity. *The Beard* thus joined Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* to form a triumvirate of banned Beat works of poetry, prose, and drama. However, the most important dramatic works by a writer with strong Beat ties are arguably the plays written by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka during his mid-1960s "black nationalist period" (83). Against the power of these works, the more absurdist or whimsical Beat dramas seem toothless and



disposable. As highlighted in Jimmy Fazzino's chapter on Jones/Baraka, the author of plays including *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964) "would repeatedly claim that he was advocating for *real violence* committed upon a racist society . . . [and] that this is what sets him apart from Artaud and the theatre of cruelty: Artaud confines his violence spectacle to the stage, while Baraka calls for violence *in the streets*" (86).

Fazzino's discussion of Jones/Baraka is part of a section on the "Afro-Beats," which also includes chapters on Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, and Adrienne Kennedy (Jones and Kaufman as writers with close connections to the white Beats, and Kennedy as a spiritual soulmate). In the case of Joans and Kaufman, this leads to a focus on acts of performance rather than plays, with Amor Kohli considering Joans's orchestration of the mass graffiti of the words "Bird Lives!" around New York City in the wake of Charlie Parker's death, and Thomas Pynn reading Kaufman's poetry performances as "a form of radical ritual communication" intended to "[effect] a change in cultural awareness" on the part of Kaufman's audience (111). The Beat canon is expanded further by the book's sections on "Poets Theatre and the Beats" and "Early Off-Off Broadway Theatre," which include chapters on Frank O'Hara, John Wieners, Sam Shepard, Rochelle Owens, and Rosalyn Drexler (all names that, like Adrienne Kennedy, receive only passing mention or no acknowledgment at all in the *Cambridge Companion*). A closing section on "Film and Beat Performance" covers cinematic works such as the 1960 exploitation film *The Subterraneans*, the aforementioned *Kill Your Darlings*, and Michael Polish's 2013 adaptation of Kerouac's *Big Sur* (1962).

Expanding the definition of Beat "performance" yields mixed results. For example, William Nesbitt considers Burroughs's shooting of Joan Vollmer as an act of "performance" on the part of the gunman. In order to do so, Nesbitt establishes Burroughs's literary device of the "routine" (the grotesque and extreme fantasies found in *Naked Lunch*) and retroactively applies this to the shooting of Vollmer: "The routine . . . has the potential to be an act with real world implications; an act that becomes more than an act, not just an act but an action, blurring and crossing the demarcation between make believe and reality—sometimes with devastating and irrevocable consequences" (65). The premise would perhaps benefit from discussion of the filmic dramatizations of Burroughs's shooting of Joan in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* and Gary Walkow's *Beat* (2000). As it is, when Nesbitt argues that "we can contextualize Burroughs within the tradition of knife-throwers hurling daggers toward captive women," it



is unclear how the “contextualization” (68) of Burroughs in a tradition of knife-throwers positions us to understand either the author’s work or Vollmer’s death. The shooting of Vollmer remains something of a litmus test for separating myth from reality where Beat studies are concerned.

The strongest writing found in the *Cambridge Companion* and *Beat Drama* (and throughout Melehy’s book) sets a standard of analysis that helps separate Beat scholarship from repetition of received wisdom or enthrallment to Beat myth. Meanwhile, the more uncomfortable facts of these writers’ lives and works (for instance, the death of Vollmer) point toward potential future difficulties regarding the Beats’ continued place on the syllabus (one thinks again of the accusation of “straight white men of privilege”). On this note, it is instructive to end by turning to Todd Tietchen’s chapter in the *Cambridge Companion* (on Beat transnationalism), which closes with a word of caution regarding the future challenges that Beats may face in the academy. Tietchen argues: “Beat literature remains a sobering reminder that transgressive art and literature can often be as socially regressive as it can be socially progressive” (222). He identifies this as “a problem for Beat canonicity given the now longstanding focus in the humanities on progressive political concerns.” To continue to ensure that the work of Beat writers remains relevant in the present day, critics will have to contend with the deeper issues raised by the less appealing aspects of the Beats and the cultural context in which their work was produced. In other words, Beat criticism will need less reiteration of familiar Beat mythology (which tends toward a rose-tinted view of the Beats as purely inspirational figures), and in its place will need more continued recognition of the true diversity and breadth of the Beats’ legacy, both good and ill.

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Thom Robinson teaches English literature at Newcastle University. He has written widely on William S. Burroughs, most recently in *Comparative American Studies*. He is currently researching the influence of John Rechy and Hubert Selby Jr. on the songwriting of Lou Reed, for a chapter to appear in *What Goes On: The Velvet Underground and After* (forthcoming).

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*Auden at Work*, edited by Bonnie Costello and Rachel Galvin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 309 pages.

### *Aidan Wasley*

At the Women's March in Washington, DC, on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration, Madonna took to the stage to address the vast crowd and drew a historical parallel to exhort her listeners toward solidarity and political resistance: "We cannot fall into despair. As the poet W. H. Auden once wrote on the eve of World War II: 'We must love one another or die.'" The marchers cheered, and the singer then performed her hit "Express Yourself." It was an effective rhetorical moment, though for students of modern poetry there were both familiar and complicated ironies in Madonna's use of Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939," to express herself and her political commitments. As Bonnie Costello and Rachel Galvin note on the very first page of their introduction to this superb collection of essays on Auden's self-revising poetics, that poem is by far the most famous example of Auden revising his own work, eventually repudiating it entirely as a dishonest rhetorical "forgery" (1) and refusing to allow it to be republished during his lifetime. Of course this wasn't the first time this poem, and that line in particular, has prominently resurfaced in public ways in fraught political times. After the 9/11 attacks the poem was reprinted in numerous newspapers, was read aloud on National Public Radio, and volleyed around the internet as a vehicle for understanding, consolation, and resolve in the face of collective trauma. And its appropriation by the 1964 Lyndon Johnson campaign may have been a factor in Auden's final renunciation of the poem: its "Daisy" ad showed a young girl annihilated in a nuclear blast caused by a theoretical President Goldwater as Johnson's voice darkly declaims, "We must either love each other or we must die."

Among the many virtues of *Auden at Work* is the way it encourages us to read even Auden's most familiar words in fresh ways, including Madonna's invocation of the power of love over despair. As this collection's title and its revelatory attention to Auden's writerly practice remind us, one of the central concerns of Auden's work from early to late—and indeed, of "September 1, 1939"—is the value, nature, and meaning of poetic *work* itself. As we see in Galvin's own contribution to



the volume, an exciting account of Auden's previously unstudied private journal from 1939, the occasion of that poem, despite its seemingly escapist setting in "one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street," was in fact Auden's personal compulsion to immerse himself in his poetic work as an ethical answer to public catastrophe. Auden's journal entry for that day reads: "I've borrowed Nijinsky's Diary from C[hester]. Just now I opened it and read 'I want to cry but God orders me to go on writing. He does not want me to be idle.' Perhaps this is a sign" (35). And in the poem's oscillation between guilty self-identification and oracular diagnosis of the origins of evil, Auden works to articulate an adequate existential response to historic disaster. While the commuter's "morning vow" to "concentrate more on my work" is evidence of a "dense" moral solipsism the poem wants to oppose, it also exactly reflects Auden's own dutiful engagement in his own work, in his case the work of poetry, in reaction to overwhelming events. Thrust by those events "into the ethical life"—the renewed awareness of one's implication in the web of human responsibilities—the poem asks, what else can we do but get down to the work, practical and moral, of our private lives? The poem struggles with itself and its own validity as an appropriate ethical response—what kind of *work* is it to write a poem while the world burns?—before ultimately suggesting that poetry's dialectical capacity to encourage private ethical labor, "to undo the folded lie," may be its most potent public value. The poem ends with an evening vow of its own to "show an affirming flame" that imagines the private work of poetry as illuminating a wider field of ethical relation and engagement, offering a vision of "universal love" born of mere "Eros and of dust" of flawed but earnestly industrious souls.

As this book helps us clearly see, an understanding of Auden's ideas about the ethics of poetic work is central to an understanding of the poet's practice, and one of the particular values of the collection is the way it illustrates, through example and argument, how deeply intertwined the ethical and the writerly aspects of Auden's art truly are. The volume's fourteen essays range widely across Auden's career and across critical methodologies, though they all largely share an interest in exploring how his writing reflected—and, in powerful ways, enacted—what he thought about poetry's place in "the ethical life." The final essay in the book, on his "work ethics," by Tony Sharpe, addresses this question directly, concluding that, "in Auden's usage, the phrase 'work of art' stresses each noun equally" (289), and the engagement of a number of other essays with specific texts or aspects of Auden's career help to make much the same point. Galvin's painstaking and revealing study of his unpublished notebook exposes in



raw, improvisatory terms “Auden’s persistent question regarding what use writing can be when the world is going to war” (25). Emily Hyde tellingly links Auden’s strategic deployment of the photographic image in his travel books, and especially in his 1946 edition of Henry James’s *The American Scene*, to his complex midcareer negotiations with the problem of, and connection between, moral and artistic choice. In Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb’s careful tracking of the emblem of Rome in Auden’s verse, from an ironically repurposed fragment of an early educational radio play into Herod’s chilling monologue in “Christmas Oratorio,” to “Roman Wall Blues” and “The Fall of Rome,” we find an especially subtle explication of Auden’s developing ideas on the relation of art to history and the appropriate poetic response to an imperium in decline. Evan Kindley’s account of Auden’s vision of education persuasively suggests how his work as a schoolteacher in the early 1930s helped point to a more public poetic mode and significantly informed his ideas “about the poet’s role in the establishment of a wider, more inclusive political community” (229). And Claire Seiler’s contextual reading of “The Age of Anxiety” traces powerful shadow texts in James Stern’s *The Hidden Damage* (1947) and the official military records of the US Strategic Bombing Survey; it connects Auden’s and Stern’s postwar work interviewing bombing survivors to the former’s “estimation of the import of daily work in the age he named” (268) and reminds us that, as in “September 1, 1939,” the poem’s final melancholy vision of faith and self-knowledge is enabled by a commuting character’s subway ride to work.

A particular emphasis of the book, and one of its most significant contributions to the current field of Auden scholarship, is a new and energetic attention to Auden’s archives, including texts and manuscripts that haven’t been much studied or even seen before, as in the case of Galvin’s survey of the 1939 journal, newly made available by the British Library. Costello’s meticulous and elegant analysis of the original notebook drafts of Auden’s 1941 poem “Atlantis” makes a strong case for the critical significance of this hard-to-categorize and understudied poem, perching us on the poet’s shoulder as he sits at his desk in his boarding house in Brooklyn (the famous “February House” on Middagh Street where Auden lived for a time with an eccentric group of artists, including Benjamin Britten, Carson McCullers, Paul and Jane Bowles, and Gypsy Rose Lee), composing, crossing out, and revising again and again as he works to find the final form for his “dialectic and bizarre” poem (quoted by Costello, 135).



Throughout the book, there is much productive mining of the accumulating richness of Edward Mendelson's magisterial Princeton editions of the plays, libretti, and prose, as well as illuminating constellations of material from other archival sources. To cite just one tiny but toothsome example, deep in the footnotes of Jonathan Foltz's fine essay on Auden's filmic writing we learn, "The July 1936 issue of *World Film News* . . . reports that Auden spoke at the Birmingham Film Society, introducing a screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*" (67). Alas, no other records of Auden's comments apparently survive, but that eminently interesting footnote encourages us to ponder further how Auden's apparent enthusiasm for German expressionist horror cinema fed his own creative work, including his explicitly expressionist contemporary plays.

Collectively, the essays in *Auden at Work* also pay rewarding attention to the startlingly broad range of nonpoetic work Auden did: along with teaching and lecturing, he was a filmmaker, opera librettist, dramatist, prolific book reviewer, editor, amateur photographer, and full-time midcentury public intellectual whose role, in Edmund Wilson's words, was "to go everywhere, be accessible to all sorts of people, serve interestedly and conscientiously in innumerable varied capacities: on the staff of a Middle Western college; at a cultural congress in India; on a grand jury in New York City, deciding the fate of gangsters; on a committee of the American Academy, making handouts to needy writers" (quoted by Justin Quinn, 237). There are fascinating engagements with his theatrical experience and imagination (Daniel Jean, Michael Wood), his collaborative process with Chester Kallman and Igor Stravinsky on *The Rake's Progress* and other operas (Reena Sastri), and his documentary film work (Foltz). Other essays aim to challenge assumptions or to surprise, as in Lisa Goldfarb's substantive discussion of Auden's unexpected debts to French poetry, or Hannah Sullivan's linkage of Auden's disdain for writing on a typewriter with a narrative of the poet's ostensible ideological conservatism.

Presenting an encouraging mix of senior scholars with newer critical voices that are helping chart the future of the field, Costello and Galvin's *Auden at Work* makes for an impressive companion to the recent Cambridge collection, *W. H. Auden in Context*, edited by Sharpe and which includes a number of the same contributors as this volume. Taken together, both books suggest a renewed dynamism in Auden studies. Several of the essays in this collection point enticingly to forthcoming



## Review

full monographs by their authors either on Auden or featuring him significantly. In its pleasing capaciousness of fresh archival material and diverse critical approaches, *Auden at Work* also stands as a worthy and much-needed heir to the crucial, and lamentably discontinued, three-volume *Auden Studies* series put out by Oxford in the 1990s and edited by Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins. As those books have for years now, this collection should serve as an essential resource for scholars interested in both the sharpest recent critical insight into Auden's work and important archival documents that are unavailable elsewhere.

This vigorous and valuable book also offers a useful opportunity to survey the contours of current Auden criticism and speculate on where it might go next. In its emphasis on the archive, genetic criticism, visual culture, and interdisciplinarity, much of this collection healthily reflects a rise in similar interests and concerns in contemporary literary scholarship more generally. And within the more limited frame of Auden studies, the book suggests that the aspects of his work that are presently among the most compelling for scholars are those that point to his connections to, or implication in, wider literary, cultural, and historical networks and institutions such as journalism, publishing, higher education, the film industry, and the midcentury military-industrial complex. However, as befitting a writer whose formal mastery of his craft was probably unmatched by any poet of his century, there happily remains an abiding interest in unraveling his technical, philosophical, and intellectual complexities on the level of individual poems. Auden has long been a central figure in the study of the Anglo-American transatlantic, and it is arguably possible to discern in the range of essays here a persistent and interesting divide in the relative critical estimation of different phases of Auden's career that could be roughly and perhaps unwisely summarized thus: American critics are more inclined to find value in Auden's later work, while some scholars across the Atlantic still tend to view much of his postmigration career with a more skeptical eye ("rebarbatively quietist" is how one contributor describes later Auden; "smoothly in step with US Cold War propaganda," as another puts it). There's a very long history to this divide—"What's Become of Wystan?" Philip Larkin famously asked almost sixty years ago—and it's obviously problematic to overgeneralize, but it does seem like the question of Auden's contemporary meaning on either side of the Atlantic might be one worth addressing directly, and in good spirits, in some future



academic forum. Other recent scholarship has productively worked to put Auden in conversation with non-Anglophone literary movements and traditions, though more work might yet be done on his stateside ties to the gay, Jewish, African American, and émigré communities in the postwar years. Encouraging new ecocritical approaches to this poet of islands, rivers, and rusting infrastructure have also begun to appear. In other ways, too, Auden seems more relevant than ever, quite apart from having been name-checked by Madonna in front of a politically engaged audience of hundreds of thousands (and millions more on television). As a writer and as a historical character, he offers a striking figure of competing sensibilities and concerns that seem to speak to the tensions of our cultural moment with surprising pertinence. Poems such as “Epitaph on a Tyrant” and “August 1968” seem as fresh as this morning’s latest batch of tweets, even as his work expresses the deepest suspicions of political art. He was an arch-formalist often derided for his retreat from difficult and adventurous art whose later work can be as opaque and uncompromising as the most avowedly experimental contemporary poetry; a champion of the literary tradition who celebrated American diversity and fostered the careers of bold new poetic voices very different from his own; a devout churchgoer who advocated gay marriage decades before it dawned on the rest of the world; a loud public voice on the American scene that embraced very public self-revision and critique; a poet who knew poetry makes nothing happen yet who believed it could still be a way of happening. And above all, as this book brilliantly shows, he was a poet at, and of, work. The care he took in “turning silence into objects,” as he put it, expressed his diligent commitment both to his craft and to “the ethical life.” And his poems make his readers work, too. In their formal balances and tensions, in the push and pull—love or despair, engagement or withdrawal, affirmation or negation—of their contending interpretive and moral claims, they force us to revise, to choose, to see ourselves for who we are. Which feels like fairly urgent business these days, as it always has been. Forty-four years after his death, we, and Auden, still have a lot of work to do.

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Aidan Wasley teaches British and American poetry at the University of Georgia and is the author of *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (2011).



*Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*, by Jean Wyatt.  
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. 246 pages.

Doreen Fowler

Jean Wyatt's *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels* is a much-needed contribution to Morrison studies because it focuses on the formal properties of Morrison's works and because it adds to the sparse criticism on the later novels, including the most recent, *God Help the Child* (2015). In this accessible and precise study, Wyatt's purpose is threefold: she uses a psychoanalytic method to show how Morrison's novels' formal properties work on readers; she demonstrates that the narrative method reflects the conceptualization of love in each novel; and she makes connections between narrative form and African American history. Wyatt is, at base, a psychoanalytic critic, but in this study, like her preceding work, *Risking Difference: Identification, Race, and Community in Contemporary Fiction and Feminism* (2004), she deftly positions psychoanalytic theory as integral to understanding not only literature but also African American history and culture, thus refuting the oft-repeated accusation that psychoanalytic interpretations are ahistorical.

*Beloved* (1987) has received so much critical attention that it would seem that there is nothing more to say. However, Wyatt succeeds in contributing not just an original reading but a multilayered one that changes the way we read the novel. According to her, *Beloved* is a pivotal novel in Morrison's literary career; that is, the novel represents a radical shift in her work to more experimental forms. Briefly looking backward at the novels prior to *Beloved*, she argues that the language of these earlier works is largely mimetic realist discourse. With *Beloved*, Morrison has said that she wanted the reader "to experience . . . what it felt like [to be a slave]" ([1992] 2008, 77). Wyatt writes that "in order to convey the disorientation of the Africans captured and thrown onto the ships in the Middle Passage . . . Morrison had to invent a language that would disorient the reader in turn" (10–11). Likewise, "the discontinuous narration, full of jumps into different time periods, had to be invented to make a reader feel something akin to the dislocations of temporality endemic to those marked by trauma" (11). Wyatt also calls on Jacques Lacan to interpret *Beloved* and argues that Sethe's experience with slavery



teaches her the Lacanian tenet that the word “manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing” (Lacan [1953] 1977, 104). Wyatt writes that, rejecting the word and the principle of substitution, Sethe embraces “a relational system of presence and connection” (13), which explains her refusal of the symbolic (cultural) order and her prolonged identification with Denver and Beloved. Finally, Wyatt proposes that belatedness characterizes both narrative form and meaning: like the long deferred disruption of the bond between Sethe and Denver, the disclosure of Sethe’s act of infanticide is deferred until two-thirds of the way through the novel.

Wyatt’s chapter on *Jazz* (1992) makes the case that the novel that followed *Beloved* carries forward its breakthrough by analyzing love through the African American cultural form of jazz. At one level, the language of the novel is “animated by the rhythms, repetitions, and variations of jazz” (8). The structure of the narrative has an improvisational quality as the narrator ends the novel by calling on the reader to take up the story and make up her own version. As Wyatt sees it, this open-endedness invokes the call-and-response pattern of African American oral and musical conditions: “The reader is called to create her riff on the theme just elaborated by the narrator, to take up the story and continue it” (45). *Jazz* also “riffs on” love in this novel: “Jazz plays with many varieties of love, and . . . narrative form in *Jazz* mirrors and expresses each of these different kinds of loving.” While the narrator begins the narrative with a model of love as traumatic loss, by the end of the novel the narrator embraces “the idea of love as continuous innovation”; Wyatt argues that the narrator changes because “she learns from her characters, who . . . make up their own idiosyncratic kinds of love.”

Perhaps more than any of Morrison’s previous novels, *Paradise* (1997) makes heavy demands on the reader as it shifts “the burden of making meaning . . . from writer to reader” (70). In a reading that makes intelligible a sometimes baffling novel, Wyatt shows that displacement organizes *Paradise* both thematically and stylistically. At the level of narrative, the reader of the novel is repeatedly textually uprooted as each chapter shifts her into an entirely new narrative world, with no guideposts or familiar characters. This readerly disorientation reflects the physical dislocation that the founding fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma, experience as they are repeatedly forced to move from place to place. But Wyatt points out that *Paradise* is a case study not only in literal but also in psychological



displacement, which is “the unconscious process whereby the emotional energy attached to one object is transferred in its entirety onto another” (69). Psychological displacement explains the central mystery of the novel, the murder of the convent women. In Wyatt’s reading, the men of Ruby, who would exert complete patriarchal control over their own wives and daughters, displace their own anxieties about the aberrant behaviors of their own women onto the convent women. They kill the women of the convent “to punish jouissance in the Other to avoid confronting female jouissance at home” (71).

In her discussion of *Love* (2003), Wyatt convincingly demonstrates that Morrison engages our notions about love through the narrative technique of belatedness; that is, the reader repeatedly learns crucial information too late. These belated disclosures cause the reader to retrospectively evaluate her own preconceptions about love and gender. Wyatt writes that the novel’s ending “not only overthrows our expectations of narrative sequence but reveals that the text has misled the reader regarding the most basic question one can ask about a novel: what is it about?” (96). The novel’s ending “makes the reader reconstruct everything that has come before” as we realize that the novel has not been about male desire at all but about the mutual love of little girls.

The central premise of the chapter on *A Mercy* (2008) is that this novel returns to the central theme of *Beloved*—the devastating psychological effects of separating a child prematurely from the mother. Once again, Wyatt investigates African American history through a psychoanalytic lens to tell this history from the inside. At the center of *A Mercy* is a traumatic misunderstanding between mother and child caused by slavery: Florens misreads her mother’s plea to the slaveholder, Jacob Vaark, to “take my daughter” (Morrison 2008, 7) as maternal repudiation, and this misread maternal message inflicts psychic damage that shapes Florens’s life. This perceived maternal rejection is responsible, for example, for her childish narrative style. Wyatt attributes her cryptic diction—short sentences, distorted syntax, and incomplete words—to a catastrophic interruption of an intersubjective process between mother and child that is necessary for the acquisition of language. Florens’s misreading of her mother’s words becomes the distorting lens through which she perceives the world: her ability to read the meanings of others’ messages is disabled and her capacity for love is stunted, so that she can experience adult heterosexual love only as a repeat performance of maternal rejection.



Wyatt reads *Home* (2012) through Freud's notion of the return of the repressed. Throughout the novel what is remembered covers over far more disturbing memories. For example, Frank remembers the beautiful horses that reared back on their hind legs but forgets the buried body of a black man, whose foot waves in the air "as though it could get out" (Morrison 2012, 4). Like the foot, meanings in this novel are buried and trying to get out. Specifically, Frank's traumatic memory of killing a Korean child who offered him sex is buried, and, when the reader unearths this memory, another deeply buried secret is revealed: Frank killed the child because her offer caused him to recognize a long-repressed sexual fantasy—a buried desire for incest with his baby sister, Cee. Once Wyatt uncovers these repressed meanings and their disguised return, they seem unmistakable and integral to the text. Wyatt also points out that repression and return operate at the national level in this novel. The medical experiments performed on Cee's uterus without her consent represent the return of what US medical history has repressed: the abuse of black people's bodies in the name of scientific research.

In her chapter on Morrison's latest novel, Wyatt proposes that *God Help the Child* (2015) revisits her former novels. More specifically, the abused children of *God Help the Child* seem to "recapitulate 'the poor little black girls' of [the] earlier novels" (182), like Pecola, the sexually assaulted child in *The Bluest Eye* (1970); or Heed, the child bride of Bill Cosey in *Love*; or Florens, the enslaved child traumatized by what she perceives as her mother's rejection of her. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison reprises these earlier narratives of childhood trauma so as to recast them in terms of an urgent message, as Wyatt describes it, "that one must get over trauma to go forward with love" (171). And once again in this last novel, as in so many of the later novels, Morrison condenses form and meaning. In the case of *God Help the Child*, to render in narrative the meaning of her emotional development, which has been arrested by maternal rejection, Bride literally regresses to a child; that is, her body ages inversely and she "chang[es] back into a little black girl" (Morrison 2015, 97). As Wyatt puts it: "This structural degeneration embodies Bride's temptation to remain stuck in the time of trauma" (182). When at the end of the novel Bride regains her womanly body, she is pregnant, and this transformation shows "that childhood trauma can be overcome and unmothered children [can] become loving mothers to the next generation" (187).



The book's conclusion, "Revisioning Love and Slavery," takes up a theme that has been suggested in earlier chapters—that "Toni Morrison in these latest novels (*Home* and *God Help the Child*) turns on her earlier works to critique them" (187). According to Wyatt, this critique is not heavy-handed but playful. It takes form, for example, in *Home* as "an impossible colloquy between character and author, a transgression of the boundary sacred to literary works" (190). Wyatt is referring here to the moment in *Home* when Frank seemingly addresses Morrison to criticize her rendering of him: "I don't think you know much about love. Or me" (69). Wyatt makes light of Frank's critique. In her reading, Frank's comment suggests Morrison's position "that there is no way of accurately preconceiving or predicting how love works in the individual instance, for love comes in a thousand different shapes" (191).

Frank's words seem to be addressed to Morrison, but, as Wyatt observes, Frank also issues a global challenge to think beyond racial stereotypes about black love. Read this way, Frank's words reinforce a central message of Wyatt's book about the call and response between reader and text. As Wyatt's skillful interpretations of Morrison's novels show, Morrison's narrative strategies draw readers into the text even as they are, in turn, called upon to make the text their own. Frank's words, then, may caution the reader not to misread the text, as Florens, in *A Mercy*, tragically misreads her mother's message. In particular, Wyatt suggests that, when Frank says, "I don't think you know much about love. Or me," he is issuing a challenge to the reader to "keep a dialogue on ideas going and . . . question and reevaluate fixed convictions" (190). Jean Wyatt's *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels* keeps the dialogue going in a way that transforms our reading of Morrison's luminous novels.

### §

Doreen Fowler is professor of English at the University of Kansas. Her latest publication is *Drawing the Line: The Father Reimagined in Faulkner, Wright, O'Connor, and Morrison* (2013), a study of the role of liminality in identity construction. She is also the author of a psychoanalytic interpretation of Faulkner's major novels, *Faulkner: The Return of the Repressed* (2000), and the coeditor of eleven collections of essays on Faulkner.



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